ALL STORIES NEW... NO REPRINTS

RANCH ROMANCES

25c

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

SECOND AUGUST NUMBER

FEATURING

RIDE A STRAIGHT ROAD
by Elmer Kelton

FORBIDDEN FREIGHT
by Walker A. Tompkins

RANCH FLICKER TALK
BY THE FAMOUS MOVIE STAR
ROBERT CUMMINGS

Amazing New Way TO A Slimmer Figure

REDUCE WITH *DELICIOUS* KELPIDINE CANDY PLAN!

"WE GUARANTEE YOU WILL LOSE UP TO
5 POUNDS IN 5 DAYS*
10 POUNDS IN 10 DAYS*
15 POUNDS IN 15 DAYS*
25 POUNDS IN 25 DAYS*
AND KEEP IT OFF"**

***How Fast You Lose Weight Depends Upon How Quickly You Order and How Much You Are Overweight**

****You Will Always Want to Keep on Eating Kelpidine Candy—and Keep on the Plan—It KEEPS Weight Off!**

THIS CANDY MUST TASTE AS GOOD AS OR BETTER THAN YOUR FAVORITE CANDY OR YOUR MONEY BACK!

Now at last science has discovered a new delightfully thrilling way to take off fat—to lose up to 25 lbs. safely! The secret is that Kelpidine Candy satisfies your *craving* for high calorie foods! It keeps you from *overeating*—the reason most doctors give for being fat! It's the best aid to will power, cuts your *craving* for foods!

NO DANGEROUS DRUGS! NO HARDSHIP DIETS!

Here is thrilling news for fat folks! You can lose up to 25 lbs. in 25 days by simply nibbling on tasty *appetite satisfying* candy, whenever you are tempted to overeat.

YOUR MONEY BACK IF YOU DON'T REDUCE TO THE WEIGHT THAT MOST BECOMES YOU!

Thousands of people were amazed to find that this delicious candy plan actually takes off weight—without dangerous drugs, starvation diet, or hard-to-follow methods. Here's one way to reduce that you will want to continue with to *keep off* fat! The Kelpidine Candy Plan helps you curb your appetite for fattening foods, helps keep you from overeating. Now you reach for a delicious sweet candy instead of fattening foods—it kills the overpowering urge to overeat—to eat between meal-snacks. Your craving for rich, fattening foods is satisfied with this candy plan. Almost like magic you begin to enjoy this plan for reducing.

SENSATIONAL TWO-WAY GUARANTEE!

This sweet delicious Kelpidine Candy plan is guaranteed (1) to take off up to 10 pounds of excess weight in 10 days. (2) to taste better or as good as your favorite candy and to be the best plan you ever followed or you get your money back.

SCIENTIFICALLY AND CLINICALLY TESTED!

That amazing ingredient in Kelpidine candy is the most remarkable discovery for fat people ever made. It's been tested by doctors in test-after-test. The results were far better than doctors ever hoped for! The results were reported in medical journals throughout the world! Doctors are invited to write for details.

HERE'S HOW TO REDUCE AND STAY SLIM!

Most people are fat because of overeating—too much high calorie fattening foods—to your amazement you will want to keep on eating this delicious candy even after you have reduced to the weight that most becomes you and you'll *keep your weight off that way!*

AMAZING DISCOVERY OF SCIENCE!

The Kelpidine Candy plan is the result of scientific research for years for a new discovery for something that will stop your craving for fattening food and also satisfy your appetite. This delicious candy does not turn into ugly fat, it gives you the same feeling of fullness you have after you have eaten a satisfying meal. It kills your desire to overeat—it kills your craving for bedtime snacks and for in-between meal snacks. It's so safe even a child can take it without bad effects. **With Kelpidine Candy all you taste is its deliciousness—you can't tell the difference!**

IT'S UNHEALTHY TO BE FAT!

Insurance companies and doctors tell everyone that too much fat shortens your life! Fat people die years sooner than people with normal weight! So be Safe! Be Fair to yourself! Start taking off ugly fat with delicious tasting Kelpidine Candy plan!

KELPIDINE CANDY IS DIFFERENT!

The amazing clinical *tested* and proven reducing substance contained in Kelpidine Candy is prescribed by many doctors—Don't be misled by imitation products—Kelpidine Candy is the result of scientific research and is the *last word* in Reducing.

DON'T CUT OUT FOODS** CUT DOWN ON CALORIES!

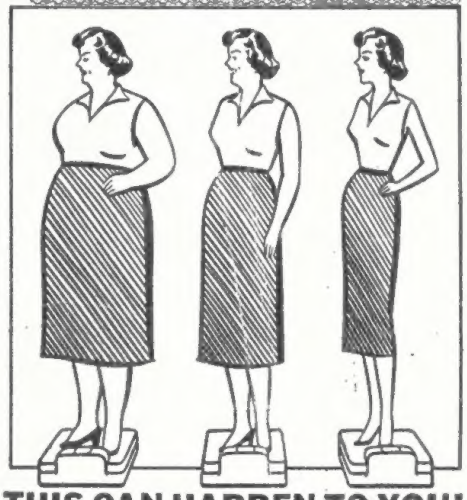
You never starve, you always feel full with Kelpidine Candy plan—You'll never suffer hunger pangs—Your desire for high calorie fattening foods is always *satisfied!* With Kelpidine Candy Plan you eat the same quantity of foods—you merely cut down on the *high calorie rich foods* with the help of Kelpidine Candy. You eat as much as you want, your calorie intake will be *less*—That's the delightful amazing thing!

YOU GET A LIBERAL SUPPLY OF CANDY!

Try the liberal supply of Kelpidine Candy Plan on our 10-day *no risk offer.* Keep a record of your weight—if you are not pleased with your loss of weight; if you can taste any difference between this candy and your favorite candy—return for refund. Just fill out coupon and mail to AMERICAN HEALTHAIDS CO., Dpt. K-76, Candy Division, 318 Market St., Newark, New Jersey.

MONEY BACK GUARANTEE

You must be entirely satisfied with your loss of weight—This candy must taste as good as or better than your favorite candy—You must get rid of dangerous excess fat or your money will be refunded—Don't delay—You have nothing to lose but excess weight so mail coupon below now!



THIS CAN HAPPEN TO YOU!

WITH THIS DELICIOUS REDUCING CANDY PLAN!

Let this delicious candy plan help you control your desire for fattening food! Let it help you put a stop to the habit of *overeating*—A habit that's so hard to break! Kelpidine candy contains that new discovery many doctors prescribe to help curb your desire to overeat (the main cause of overweight).

$1.00 TRIAL SAMPLE SIZE!

CUT OUT AND MAIL—NO RISK COUPON NOW!

AMERICAN HEALTHAIDS COMPANY, Dpt. K-76
Candy Division,
318 Market Street, Newark, New Jersey

- ☐ I enclose $1.00, send trial sample size, postage pre-paid!
- ☐ Rush a *Liberal Supply* of Kelpidine *Candy* plan. I enclose $3.00, send postage pre-paid. (I save up to 75c postage by sending payment with order.)
- ☐ Rush a *Large Economy Supply* of Kelpidine *Candy.* I enclose $5.00, send postage pre-paid. (I save up to 90c postage by sending payment with order.)

NAME .....

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Why settle for "adequate" pay when you can enjoy the rewards and recognition that come with success?

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30th Year
OF PUBLICATION

SECOND AUGUST NUMBER

August 13, 1954
Volume 186, No. 4

RANCH ROMANCES

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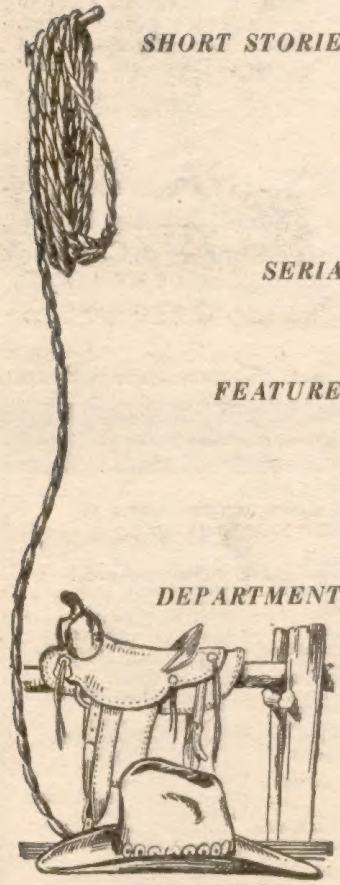

HELEN DAVIDGE
Editor

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If you are skinny, thin and underweight mail this coupon for this latest discovery of modern medical science. It's called WATE-ON and anyone in normal health may quickly gain 2, 4 as much as 5 lbs. in a week . . then 10 pounds, 20 pounds and more so fast it's amazing! Not a medicine, not intended to cure anything. Instead WATE-ON is a new different formula that's pleasant to take as directed and is loaded with concentrated calories so prepared as to be far easier to be used by the system in building wonderful body weight. Cheeks fill out, neck and bust-line gain, arms, legs, thighs, ankles, skinny underweight figures fill out all over the body into graceful curves that draw admiring glances. WATE-ON also improves the appetite, gives quick energy, guards against fatigue, sleepless nights, poor endurance, low resistance. Also makes for better digestion of fats that put on weight naturally. Try WATE-ON today

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DOCTORS—
Your recommendation and approval is invited. Write for professional samples.

More Than Many a Meal in Daily Dose

Each daily dosage is as rich in calories as many a skinny person's regular meal

For Men, Women, Boys, Girls and Convalescents

WATE-ON is entirely safe, contains no drugs, no stimulants, nothing but a brand new concentrated food formula that's EXTRA RICH in easier to assimilate calories, fortified with other proven weight building elements.

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Mail the ON APPROVAL coupon below to send for your generous size bottle of new WATE-ON On arrival pay $3.00 or $5.50 for double size plus C.O.D. postage on the guarantee if the first bottle doesn't increase your weight to your satisfaction all you need do to get your money back is return the empty bottle. Now today . . mail the coupon. Youngsters, get mother or dad to order for you.

MAIL THIS COUPON TODAY

WATE-ON CO., Dept. 15L
230 No. Michigan Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.
In Canada: WATE-ON Ltd.
320 Jones Ave., Toronto 6, Ont.

Send one bottle WATE-ON. I'll pay $3.00 plus C.O.D. postage on arrival on guarantee I must be satisfied with first bottle or money back when I return the empty bottle. (Cash orders mailed postage prepaid.)

( ) Put X here if you want double size for $5.50.

Name.....

Address.....

City.....Zone....State.....

WATE-ON COMPANY, Dpt. 15L, 230 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.
In Canada: WATE-ON Ltd., 320 Jones Avenue, Toronto 6, Ontario

Two Lovelies

Dear Editor:

I am a girl of 15 and am very lonely. I like to read exciting magaines such as RANCH ROMANCES. I'm 5'5" and weigh 120 lbs. I have curly brown hair and blue eyes. Lila is a girl of 15 and is very attractive, and lonely too. She is 5'2" and weighs 120 lbs. She has brown eyes and brown hair. We would like to write to boys between the ages of 16 and 25.

ROWENA SMITH
LILA STALEY

Glen Elder, Kansas

Sounds Nice

Dear Editor:

This is my first time to write and also first time to get a pen pal. I am going on 13, stand 5'1". I have dark brown hair and blue eyes, and weigh 100 lbs. I am in the 7th grade. My hobbies are the movies and sports, especially basketball.

LOLA MAE WEBB

Route 1
Puryea, Tennessee

Figure Skater

Dear Editor:

I am 18 and have reddish brown hair and brown eyes. I stand 5'4" tall and weigh 115 lbs. I am considered quite attractive and have lots of boy-friends. I really don't need more friends, but I enjoy writing letters. I like to skate and am somewhat of a figure skater. I will exchange snaps with any one who cares to do the same.

ALICIA DEVANY

118-33 234 Street
Cambria Heights, Long Island, N.Y.

Wants a Real Cowgirl

Dear Editor:

Will you please help me lasso some pen-pals through your column? Preferably pals from the Wild West. This tenderfoot cowgirl is 22 years of age. Has short black hair, not becoming to wear a cowgirl's sombrero. Has black eyes, but not sharp enough to aim straight with a gun and hit an escaping outlaw. Loves to read Western magazines such as RANCH ROMANCES, also likes stories by Zane Grey and Max Brand. It would be wonderful if the lassoed pen-pals will write me about their dude ranches, horses, steers, rattlesnakes and all about their lives in the West. Come on, Pards! How about writing to this tenderfoot? I have hurled my lariat, please be lassoed, won't you?

MILA F. MIGUEL

P. O. Box 115
Zamboanga City, Philippines

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 29 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Lonely Kansas Gal

Dear Editor:

I am a lonely Kansas gal and I would like it very much if you would publish my name and address as soon as possible. I would like to hear from all servicemen between the ages of 18 and 21. I am 15.

JOYCE ANN WOLTJE

Box 175 R. 2
Liberal, Kansas

Short and Sweet

Dear Editor:

I am 14, have brown hair, brown eyes, stand 5'5" tall and weigh 118 lbs. My favorite sports are swimming, roller skating, horseback riding, and soft ball. I would like to hear from boys and girls of all ages.

CHERLE CLASSER

R.R. 2
Centerville, Iowa

A Lonesome Farmboy

Dear Editor:

I am a lonely lad a long way from home who would like to receive more mail. I am 19, 6'1" tall and weigh 165 lbs. My home town is Evansville, Ill., and at heart I'm just a farm boy who likes lots of Western music. Now I am in the Sea Bee's and will be stationed on Guam for the next 16 months, with plenty of time to answer all letters received. This is my first try for pen pals and I do hope you print my letter.

CHARLES MERTENS

Mobile Construction Batt. 10
COD Platoon
% FPO San Francisco, Calif.

Country Mother

Dear Editor:

I sincerely wish you could find a space in the Our Air Mail column of RANCH ROMANCES. It is a wonderful magazine and I look forward to

it each month. Living in the country, I am a great lover of the quiet outdoor life. I have four children, two married and the others living with me. I will exchange snaps of them and myself.

R. CONLBOURNE

Sanford, Va. R.F.D.

Likes to Travel

Dear Editor:

I am a reader of RANCH ROMANCES and I think Our Air Mail is a wonderful idea. I hope you'll print my letter soon, as I want lots of pen pals. I am a girl of 19 with brown eyes and black hair, and I stand 5'5". I enjoy the movies, reading, and meeting new people. I'd like to hear from boys and girls and anyone else who cares to write. I love to travel and could tell them all about the Philippines.

VIDY INFANTE

Canelar Street
Zamboanga City
Philippines

Reverse

Dear Editor:

This is my first attempt to get my name published in Our Air Mail. I've written to several people whose names appeared in your magazine, and would like to have some folks write to me. I am 16 and have red hair and blue eyes. My favorite sports are softball and roller skating. I promise to answer all letters, but I'd especially like to hear from servicemen.

JUDY WALKER

157 Walnut St.
Mount Clare, Pa.

Real Outdoor Type

Dear Editor:

Would like to correspond with men and women of any age who love the out-of-doors. I'm 27, 5'8" and have dark brown hair and brown eyes. I like camping, hiking and horseback riding. I feel as much at home in jeans as in a formal gown. I have so many interests that I'm sure I'll have one to share with each person who writes.

AUDRY PUTT

2131 N 2nd St.
Harrisburg, Pa.

Do You Like Horses?

Dear Editor:

I have read your magazine for several years and like it very much. As I am interested in horses and outdoors, this magazine is perfect. I am 55 and have lived on a farm most of those years. I was once redheaded but am sort of red gray now, and stand 5'9". I would like to hear from readers who like horses and dogs. I have two of both. Here's hoping to have lots of letters.

ALICE HOSNER

Route 1 Box 136P
Apopla, Fla.

She Braved Men's Lust for Buried Treasure!

Nat Stockton had extraordinary courage for a girl. But when she stepped aboard the "Janie B" to sail in search of buried treasure, she was hardly prepared for the cruelty and bloodshed! An amazing adventure story!

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But don't put it off. Take advantage of this money-saving introductory offer by filling out and mailing the order form below *today*.

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- ★ Serial
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(Add 80c for Canadian Postage; $1.50 for foreign)

TRAIL DUST

PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found it. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!

A DENVER state legislator after a trip on business submitted a voucher for mileage, but nothing for meals. On the bottom of the voucher he added a note which said: "Carried my lunch."

IN LINCOLN, Nebr., one of the trucks ticketed at a highway weighing station because it was too heavy happened to be a state weights-and-measures truck sent to test the scales' accuracy.

DALLAS POLICE are searching for the person who attended a church masquerade party and made off with the best prize: $134 in cash from other masqueraders' pocketbooks.

A WACO, Tex., young lady discovered when her date left her at her door that he had relieved her of her cash and car keys. She couldn't enter her car—still at the door—but she grabbed a cab for an unsuccessful search for the young man . . . and when she got home again the car was gone, too.

IN BURLINGTON, Iowa, the last straw for a lady pedestrian was when a motorist accused her of crossing against the light. "Look, mister," she said, "my mother-in-law's frustrated, my little boy takes after his father, I'm behind in my television payments, and I won't take a lot of drivel from a stranger." Then she hit the offender with a sack of eggs.

A GATESVILLE, Tex., man, celebrating his 79th birthday, calculated he'd spent a total of about 700 days in church, and a total of 311 days shaving to get ready for church.

THE PRIZE-WINNING essay by some 8-year-olds in Denver on "My Pet" went like this: "My dog is named Mitzi. My dog is a good watchdog. My dog watches TV."

NEXT-DOOR NEIGHBORS in Chicago are named Ernest Bourbon and Ken Soda, but until someone introduces them they'll never get to mix.

IN OKLAHOMA CITY a man's garage is being called "mother" since three baby sparrows were hatched recently with no incubation other than the warm floor.

MAN IN DALLAS who recently swapped cars remembered he'd left in the old one a book bought a year ago, which he never could remember to remove from the glove compartment. The book: How To Improve Your Memory.

A TEXARKANA robber consoled his two gas-station victims by telling them the $222 he was making off with was deductible from their income tax.

RANCH FLICKER TALK

by movie editor ROBERT CUMMINGS

This famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns

RIVER OF NO RETURN

20th Century-Fox's Western combines Cinemascope and Technicolor, adventure, romance, songs, dances—and Marilyn Monroe

WESTERN fans are no longer being discriminated against, I'm happy to report. Now *we've* got Marilyn Monroe! She stars with Robert Mitchum and Rory Calhoun in an exciting story of the Canadian Northwest, *River of No Return.*

Marilyn seemed to be as happy about her latest role as I was. "At last," she said, "I feel like a real character, not just a sexy dame. Do you realize that in spite of all the talk about me, I'd never played a real passionate love scene on the screen?"

She plays several in *River of No Return* with both Bob and Rory, and she was very pleased with the studio's choice of leading men for her. "Real he-men," she gloated, "not the comedy characters I've been playing opposite in musicals."

But she found that Westerns are a lot more rugged to act in than musicals, especially when the emphasis is on action, and it's all filmed outdoors. The company spent six weeks in the Banff and Jasper National Parks in Canada, and for everyone it was a rough experience.

The climax of the story shows the three stars battling their way down a mountain river full of rapids, whirlpools and white water, and there was one moment when Marilyn thought the title, *River of No Return,* applied to her.

Fighting on foot in the tricky stream, Marilyn slipped and tore a ligament in her leg. She was thoroughly drenched, of course, and in considerable pain, but she made her way to the shore without help. No one was more surprised than she to find that her injury was serious enough to keep her sidelined for ten days.

Bob Mitchum told me that he was even more impressed with Marilyn's courage than with her sex appeal. "I expected her to be glamorous, but I never thought she'd take the risks she did. I don't know another leading lady who's as brave."

For him the risks were routine, and the whole location trip was as much pleasure

as business. Bob's an enthusiastic fisherman, and he brought along a 20-pound load of rods and reels and tackle. On any day when Bob had a few hours away from the camera, the company could count on fresh-caught trout for dinner.

People don't think of Bob as primarily a Western star, and few of them know that he actually started his movie career in real horse operas. He was a villain in the Hopalong Cassidy series ten years ago. "I got paid fifty dollars a week," he says, laughing, "and all the hay I could eat."

Rory Calhoun also feels right at home in Westerns, though in this one he plays a villain for a change.

"But," said Rory, "I found that this badman business is pretty nice work. In *River of No Return* I actually played more love scenes with Marilyn than Bob did. It takes her quite a while to find out what a wrong hombre I am, and Bob's so busy hunting me down through most of the picture that he hasn't time for love—not till the end, when he gets a nice, ladylike kiss."

Rory brought along his pretty wife, Lita Baron, on the trip, and while the Cinemascope cameras were grinding away, she was busy making her own version of the story on 16 mm film.

When she finally showed her movie to Rory, it turned out that there was one big difference between it and the real one, besides the size of the film. In Lita's story, Rory turned out to be the hero—naturally!

Besides Cinemascope and Technicolor, adventure and romance, *River of No Return* has songs and dances, all by Marilyn.

In this movie Marilyn wore period costumes for the first time in her career. And a member of the crew made Marilyn's favorite crack, when he saw her with her waist pulled in to a mere 19 inches.

"Look at that hour-glass figure," he sighed. "What a way to tell time!"

Hollywood wants to drag people away from their TV sets; and if you ask me, a movie like this is just the way to do it.

Tommy Rettig helps Marilyn care for wounded Bob Mitchum

MARILYN MONROE
A Real Trouper

YOU CAN read Marilyn Monroe's life anywhere—and you probably have—so you're not going to get the story of the calendar girl who made good.

What I want to talk about is a side of Marilyn that not many people know about—the good sport, the tomboy, the friendly gal who just happens to have a beautiful face and a sexy figure.

I learned these things abut her from the company who worked with her in her latest Western, *River of No Return*. I learned them from everyone—from the camera crew to the stars, Bob Mitchum and Rory Calhoun.

She played without a double, shooting the rapids in a tumultuous mountain stream, where the current can't be controlled even by a Hollywood studio. She tore a leg muscle and nearly got pneumonia, but she never complained. Rory and Bob were mighty impressed with her bravery, but the rest of the cast and crew loved her most for her friendliness.

Take ten-year-old Tommy Rettig, for instance. He's not of an age when most lads would be impressed by a girl like Marilyn. And Tommy wasn't, either—until she introduced him to her future husband, Joe DiMaggio. Joe autographed a baseball for Tommy and posed for snapshots with him.

But even when Joe wasn't around, Tommy still stayed as close as possible to Marilyn, so apparently it was not just the fact that she went with the great Joe DiMaggio which impressed him. In fact, he made a date with her to take her to the premiere of his latest movie, *The 5000 Fingers of Dr. T*, which she kept—and several Sunday afternoon bicycling dates—which she also kept.

A movie company on location always brings hundreds of spectators, even in sparsely populated country like the Canadian Northwest, and Marilyn was as charming to the fans as she is to everyone. She smiled and waved at so many tourists' cameras that she gave the producer a great idea.

"If we charged a nickel a snapshot," he said, "we could pay for the picture's production costs right here."

He didn't put the idea into effect, of course, but I imagine plenty of photography fans would have been glad to pay the price. And there was one shot which would have been worth a lot more—if anyone had been around to take it.

Marilyn had found the weather much colder than she'd expected, so she went shopping for long underwear. The clerk in the general store was worried about the fit, so he suggested she try it on. Marilyn agreed, and she found the sight of herself in red flannels, several sizes too big, so riotously funny that she paraded around the shop in them to give everyone a laugh.

Actually it was the daytime sun that bothered Marilyn more than the evening cold, because as she confided to the make-up man, "I like to be blonde all over."

The make-up man took this problem very seriously, and finally came up with a special foundation cosmetic, mixed with sunburn oil, that kept her skin as creamy fair as ever.

To give her songs in the movie the proper Western accompaniment, Marilyn learned to play the guitar. She worked as hard at it as she had to to learn singing and dancing for her two previous musical pictures.

You'd think a girl with her natural physical endowments would be content just sitting around being beautiful, but Marilyn's ready to tackle anything. So far she has always succeeded.

(20th Century-Fox)

Marilyn's known as one of the friendliest girls in Hollywood

Ride a

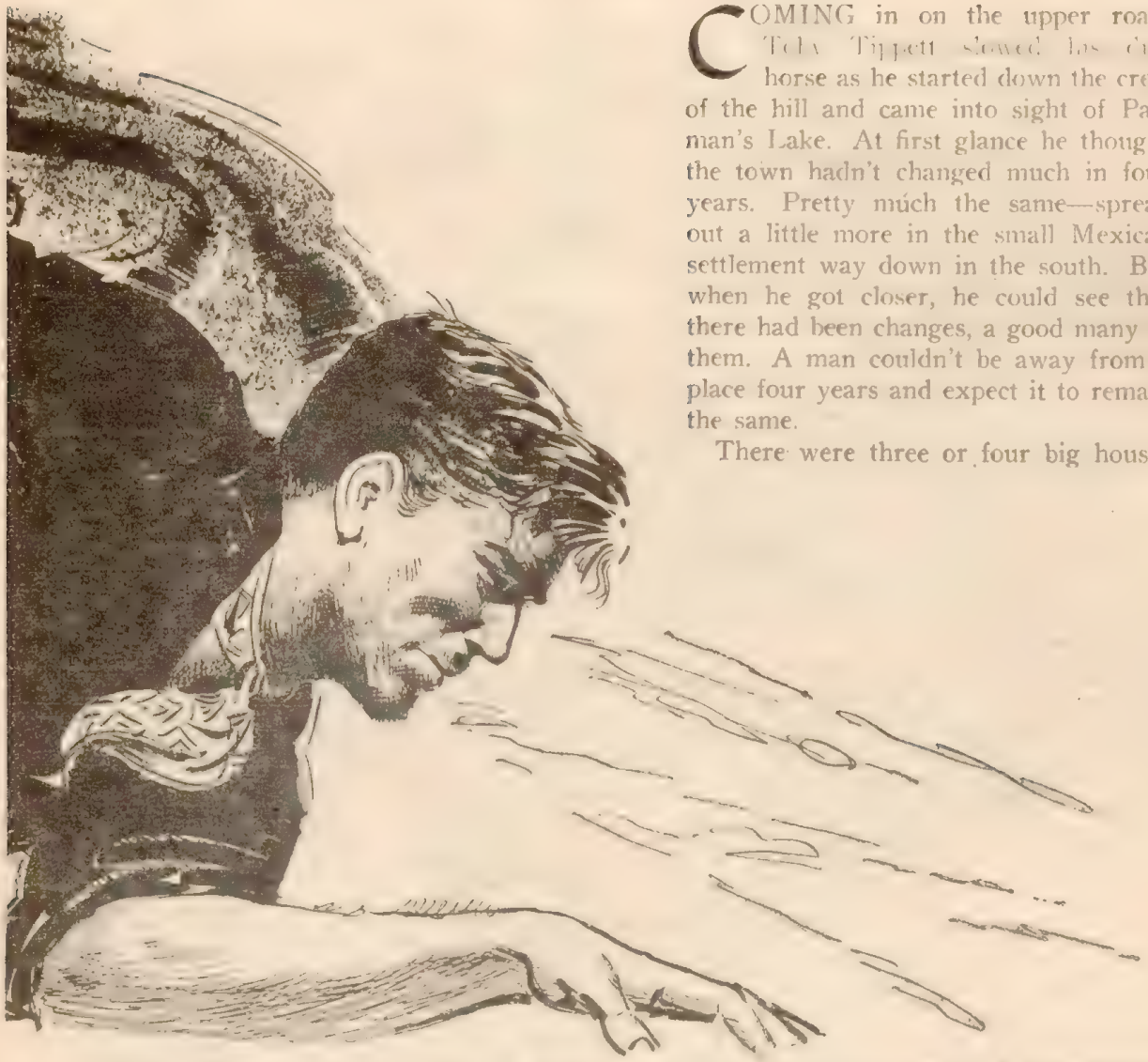
There are many detours on a man's way to prove himself. For

Straight Road

by ELMER KELTON

COMING in on the upper road, Toby Tippett slowed his dun horse as he started down the crest of the hill and came into sight of Patman's Lake. At first glance he thought the town hadn't changed much in four years. Pretty much the same—spread out a little more in the small Mexican settlement way down in the south. But when he got closer, he could see that there had been changes, a good many of them. A man couldn't be away from a place four years and expect it to remain the same.

There were three or four big houses



Toby there were rustling, prison, and men who wanted him dead

up on Silk Stocking Street. Two-story houses they were, the kind a man saw in the prosperous cotton towns back in East Texas. Times must have been pretty good in the cow business lately, Toby decided.

There were a few new buildings along the business street, too. They had torn down the old Mustang Saloon. Another one stood in its place, a big outfit with a conservative little sign up front that read Equity Bar.

A grin formed on Toby's face as his memory ran back to things he had seen and done in the old Mustang. He had been too young to go in there, really, but the way people looked at things then, a man was old enough if he was big enough. And Toby had always been a stretchy, overgrown kid for his age.

They hadn't gotten around to building a new courthouse. The old frame one stood just as always on the big courthouse square. It was a couple of years late for a paint job. Saloons always did seem to do better than the county, when it came to taking in revenue.

Sight of the courthouse brought back some other memories, memories that made the grin fade. What had happened to him there would be with him as long as he lived. It showed in the lines carved years early in a face that still was youthful in other ways. It showed in the solid maturity of his blue eyes, eyes which should still shine with mischief.

The homesickness came sweeping over him again, hard. He wanted to keep riding until he got to the ranch, until he had ridden through the last familiar gate and closed that familiar old door behind him. But the sun was dropping low over the cedar-covered hills west of town.

At the end of the street old Roper Finney's livery barn stood just as it always had. It never had had a coat of paint, and the frame walls were sun-bleached to a dull gray, the boards warped and cracked. Toby dismounted in front of it and stretched his long saddle-weary legs.

A short, middle-aged man came out and squinted at him.

"What'll you have, cowboy?"

"Like to put up my horse. And I reckon old Roper'll still let a man make his bed in the hay, won't he?"

The little man peered closer at him. "You been gone a long time, ain't you? Old Roper ain't been here in two years or more. Sold this place to me and went back to East Texas. Had an itch to farm some cotton."

Toby acknowledged the information with a nod. "Been a good year for cotton back there. Hope he's making a crop. How about that bed?"

"Sure," the stableman replied, "help yourself. Unsaddle, and I'll feed your horse."

Curiosity was working at the little man. Toby could see it making a fever in his pale eyes. Presently, dipping oats out of a bin with a five-gallon bucket, the stableman spoke.

"You live here?"

Toby said, "The old home place is twenty miles out of town, south and west."

"Well, if this is your home, where you been so long?"

Toby hesitated, then shrugged. No use in trying to make a secret of it. The word would spread quickly enough, soon as anybody who knew him spotted him here in town.

"I've been in jail," he said. "For four years in the state penitentiary."

He thought the stableman was going to spill the bucket of oats. But the little man got control of himself and hurried on out the back door to the corral. There wouldn't be any more questions out of him, Toby knew.

The washstand was still where Roper had always kept it. Toby washed the trail dust off of his face and hands. He had shaved this morning. Feeling his chin, he decided that would do till he got home.

One big job was ahead of him right now. He dreaded it in a way. All the long ride across more than half a state, he had thought about it, and knew it was something he had to do. He worried over it now, wondering how the sheriff would take it—

wondering if he could find the words he wanted.

TOBY STARTED down the wheel-rutted street, afoot, toward the courthouse. It seemed to him that he could feel the eyes staring, the fingers pointing, and he knew it was his imagination running away with him. This had been one of the things he had dreaded most, his first time in Patman's Lake, not knowing how the people were going to receive him.

A cowboy came riding down the street toward him. Toby knew the face, although he couldn't tie a name to it. He knew where the puncher had worked four years ago.

Toby managed a smile and a quick howdy.

The rider slowed, and recognition brought shock to his face. He stared at Toby a moment, muttered something in answer, and hurried his horse on down the street.

No, Toby knew, it wouldn't take long for word to get to the Damon Frost ranch. They wouldn't be happy out there, some of them.

Toby half hoped he would find the sheriff's office empty, that he could put off the visit for a while.

A girl was seated at the rolltop desk. She looked up quickly as Toby walked in the door. She was nineteen, maybe, or twenty. She stood up, a slender girl, almost thin. Her oval face lacked a little of being pretty. But a man would never let that bother him. Her eyes made up for it. They were wide, gray, expressive eyes. And because of them, he knew who she was. Sheriff Cass Duncan had the same kind of eyes.

"I was looking for Cass," he said.

She was studying him with a quiet friendliness. "He's down the street. He'll be back in a minute. Won't you sit down, Toby?"

Her calling him by name brought momentary surprise. She knew who he was, all right. But more than that, it was the first time anybody had called him by his first name in years. Always it was just, "Hey, Tippett!"

Seating himself, he stared at her. It was pleasant to look at a girl, especially when he had seen so few for such a long time.

"You're Cass's daughter, aren't you?" he asked.

She nodded. "That's right. I remember when they had you and Dodd Parrish here, in the jail out back. I used to bake a cake or a pie every day or two and take it to you."

Toby smiled at her. "I remember too. I haven't had any cooking like that since. But you've changed a lot. You weren't more than fifteen or sixteen."

Her gaze was level, appraising. "You've changed a lot too, Toby. And all for the better, I'd guess."

Heavy footsteps sounded in the hallway. Toby stood up as Cass Duncan walked in through the door. The sheriff stopped short.

"Toby," he said. "Toby Tippett."

He lifted his hand uncertainly. Toby stepped forward and took it.

"You're looking good, son," the sheriff said, the surprise fading.

"I had a chance to do outside work most of the time. You're looking good too, Cass."

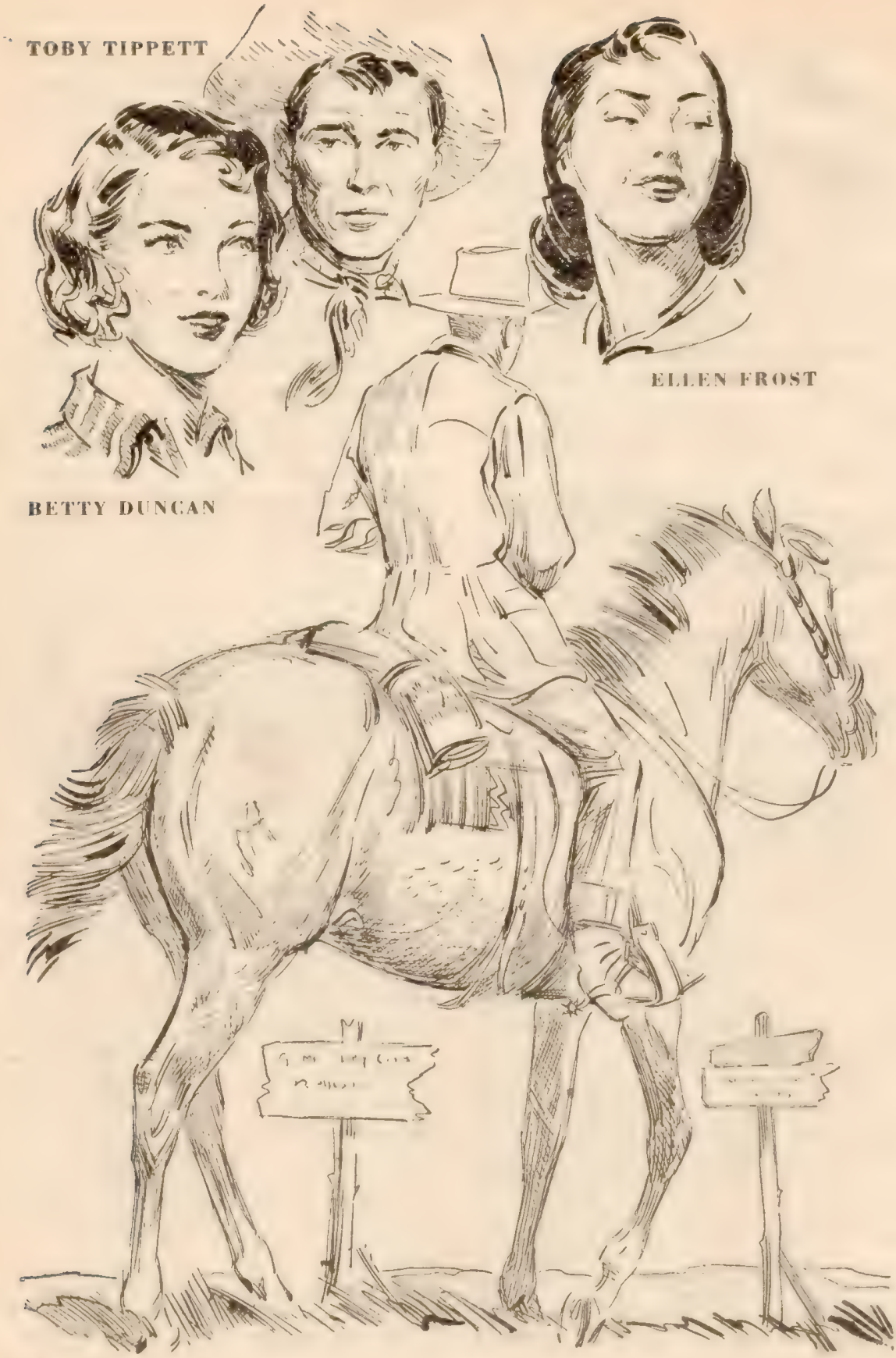
The sheriff smiled. "My daughter's cooking. She doesn't believe in throwing anything away."

CASS DUNCAN was nearing middle age. His coarse black hair was shot with gray, and his mustache no longer was the raven black which Toby remembered from his boyhood. Cass had always been a kindly man. He could bawl out an unruly boy in a way that took the hide off. But there was always a grin and a handshake later, if it looked as if the boy deserved it.

He had always been able to handle men, too. Not many of the backtrail kind ever stayed in Cass's county long.

"You figuring on staying here, Toby?" he queried.

The young man nodded. "This is home, Cass. Folks may not take to me any more. But I want to stay. I'm hoping they'll let me."


TOBY TIPPETT
ELLEN FROST
BETTY DUNCAN

The sheriff's eyes appraised him. Toby felt the friendliness in them, yet he was still ill at ease.

"Depends some on how you take the folks, Toby. I hope you didn't come back with any grudges."

Toby shook his head. "No grudges, Cass. That's what I came to tell you. I wanted you to know that I've got no hard feelings for what happened. I'm old enough now to realize that I got what I had coming to me, and no more.

"I was just a wild kid then, young, dumb, and too well fed. I made my mistakes, and I've paid for them. What's more, I'm glad I did."

Now came the hard part. He dug deep for the words

"You did me a big favor when you brought me in, Cass. If you hadn't, I might have kept going on the same way. I was just rustling cattle then. But later it might have been killing. You stopped me in time, and I'm grateful to you. Now the account's all squared. I intend to ride a straight road from here on out."

Cass Duncan's eyes studied him. A warm smile came up into them. "I believe you, son. You don't know how tickled I am to hear you say it." He hesitated a moment. "There's one thing that still bothers me, though. At the trial you and Dodd Parrish maintained all along that there wasn't anybody involved but just the two of you. Everybody knew there had to be more. But you two boys went on and took all the punishment. Maybe now you'd like to tell me the rest of the story."

Warily Toby shook his head. "No, Cass. Even if there had been anybody else with us—and mind you, I'm not saying there was—don't you think they'd have learned their lesson from what happened to Dodd and me?"

The memory of Dodd Parrish was always painful to Toby. He'd taken sick and died the second winter.

Cass shrugged, still smiling. "I reckon so, Toby. Leastways, the cow stealing stopped around here after you two boys went up."

Toby nodded. That was the way he had hoped it would be.

"Now, Cass, let's talk about something else. Tell me what has happened since I've been gone. How's Ellen Frost?"

Mention of the name brought a slow frown to the sheriff's face. "Ellen? Oh, she's doing fine, I guess. Got half the young men in the country after her—after her and her dad's money. You were going with her, weren't you?"

Toby nodded again. "Yes. We had sort of an understanding that some day we were going to get married. She wrote to me for a while, but the letters finally stopped."

There was pain in his face now. He had tried for a long time to reconcile himself to the idea that she was lost to him. But he never had been able to. The memory of her was as fresh as if he had seen her yesterday. It had always been so.

SOMETHING was troubling Cass Duncan. He frowned and tightened his fist, studying the toes of his old scuffed-up boots. The girl was watching Toby, her eyes saying nothing.

"Look, Toby," Cass said, "I know how you feel. But you better stay away from the Frost place. It'll only mean trouble for you if you go out there."

Toby peered closely at him. "Old Damon Frost?"

Duncan's eyes said yes. "He was awful bitter about you, son. He'd have gotten you two hung, if he could have. He'll never in a hundred years believe you've reformed. Give him the slightest excuse and he'll hound you till he's got you back in jail—or dead!"

Toby pondered that. "I don't want trouble, Cass. Not with old Damon or anybody else. I'll watch out, I promise you." Then he changed the subject. "You seen Dad lately?"

Cass nodded.

Toby said, "He never was much of a hand to write letters. I got a few from him, but they were always short. Looked like he sweated blood, just writing that much. I'm sure anxious to see him."

Duncan avoided Toby's eyes. "Toby, there's something else. You're going to find that your dad has changed some."

Fear hit Toby like the strike of a club. "He's sick or something?"

"Not sick, exactly. It's just that—well, he's had it pretty hard since you've been gone. It's taken less than that to break some men. And Sod Tippett's old."

Toby's throat swelled. He looked at the floor, and remorse burned in him like a banked fire. Toby had been the only son born to a man already in middle age, the son who had become everything to Sod Tippett after his wife died. Sod had drudged for years on the little ranch that was half his and half the bank's. He had done it for his son, and all he had ever asked in return was Toby's love.

And Toby repaid him for those years by leaving his father to face his old age alone, with nothing remaining to him but smashed dreams and misery of soul.

The knowledge of this, and the bitter driving of his conscience, had been with Toby a long time now. They had done much to carve the lines in his face and burn the foolish gleam of kid wildness out of his eyes.

"It may be too late, Cass," Toby said with sincerity. "But if there's any way I can, I'm going to make it up to him. I'll work till I drop in my tracks, if I have to. I'm going to repay him for all those wasted years."

Cass Duncan and his daughter watched through the window as Toby walked out of the big frame courthouse and down the street.

The girl asked, "What do you think, Dad?"

Cass placed his hand on his daughter's slender shoulder. "I think he means it, Betty. I think he wants to go straight."

She frowned. "What about the people here? Will they let him?"

The sheriff shook his head. "I don't know, Betty. I don't know."

AHEAD OF HIM, bathed in the cherry glow of the newly risen sun, Toby Tippett could see the house where he had been born. His heartbeat quickened. His throat tightened to the quick rush of memories, and anticipation of seeing his father again.

The thought of it had kept him awake all night, lying in the livery stable's hay and watching the twinkle of stars through the big open door. Some time after midnight, unable to contain himself, he had saddled up and hit the road south.

He dropped the reins over a picket in front of the house. There was a sag to the fence, and the house had fallen into poor repair in four years' time. The barn was missing some shingles, too, he saw at a glance. Well, he'd fix that. Maybe it was a good thing. Lots of work was what he needed.

His hand trembled as he reached for the knob and pushed the door inward. He blinked at the sting in his eyes. Sod Tippett was faced away from him, stooped over the wood stove where bacon sizzled in a frying pan, and coffee boiled in a smoke-blackened pot.

"Hello, Dad," Toby spoke tightly.

The old man straightened a little and froze there. Then, slowly, he turned, his faded eyes wide in unbelief, his jaw agape.

"Toby!" he whispered. "Son!"

Toby took three long strides across the room and threw his arms around the stooped, frail shoulders.

For a long time no words passed between them. They just looked at each other, throats too tight for talking. Hunger had been gnawing at Toby for a long time, because he had never gotten around to eating any supper last night. Now, with breakfast in front of him, he was just content to sit and look at the man across the table.

Sod Tippett was old now, old even beyond his years. Toby had been expecting it, but the shock had staggered him, actually seeing the change that four hard years had beaten into his father.

"Son," the old man asked finally, "you're out for good? You're going to stay?"

"Yes, Dad. I'm here to stay."

He thought he could see the thin old shoulders heave with controlled emotion, and he looked to the warped plank flooring that hadn't been clean in a long time.

After a bit, Sod Tippett had a grip on himself. "Son," he said, "I knew you'd be coming home soon. I could feel it. Just the other day, I was telling your mother, 'Toby's on the way home.' "

Toby's jaw fell, and suddenly there was ice at the pit of his stomach. Now he realized fully what Cass Duncan had been trying so painfully to tell him.

"I was telling your mother . . ." old Sod Tippett had said; but Toby's mother had been dead for fifteen years!

Sod had finally loosened up, and now he was talking freely. Toby sat there nodding, hearing little of what was said. He covered his face with his hand.

THE RIDERS came in the early afternoon. Toby was up on the house, checking the cracked shingles and trying to find the spots that would have to be patched. He heard the clatter of hoofs and looked out across the big corral. He saw the four horsemen rein through the wide gate and head up toward the house. At the distance, and with four years' absence behind him, it was hard to recognize most of the men, but there was no mistaking the man who rode in the lead.

This was Damon Frost, and the grim set of his square shoulders made it plain that he wasn't here to say howdy.

Toby eased down off of the roof and waited in front of the house.

As the riders reined up, he stepped forward and held out his hand toward Damon Frost.

"It's been a long time, Mr. Frost," he said pleasantly. "You're looking good."

Frost made no move to grip Toby's hand. Instead, he pulled his right hand even farther back, near his belt. His square face was set in a hard scowl. The years hadn't changed him much. A little more gray in his hair and his thick mustache, maybe, and a little more weight around his middle. Nothing like the changes in old Sod Tippett.

Toby glanced at the other three men. One was the cowboy who had seen him yesterday in town. Another was Marvin Sand. Sand was two or three years older than Toby. He had worked for Damon Frost a long time. Toby remembered lots of things about Marvin Sand, few of them with pleasure.

The fourth man was Damon's son, Alton Frost. Alton was just about as old as Toby. They had been friends since they had both been in the paint pony and marbles age.

"Howdy, Alton," Toby smiled. "It's sure good to see you."

Alton Frost glanced uncertainly at his father. Yes, old Damon still ruled his family with an iron hand. Or he tried to. Alton flushed a quick, uneasy grin at Toby. "How've you been, Toby?"

"Tolerable. How's Ellen? I'm sure anxious to see her."

It was Damon Frost who replied to that. "That's one reason I came over here, Tippett. Ellen doesn't want to see you. You'll leave her alone."

Toby tried hard to keep some trace of pleasantness in his face. But it was draining fast, and anger was seeping in. "Did she tell you to tell me that?"

Frost's face darkened. "*I'm* telling you. Stay away from her. I'll have no cow thief even talking to my daughter."

"I've paid my debt, Mr. Frost. I'm a free man."

Frost's eyes bored into him. "To me, Tippett, you're a cow thief, and you always will be."

He waited to see if Toby was going to say any more to that. Toby didn't. Frost leaned forward on his saddlehorn, his eyes like cold steel.

"I wouldn't advise you to stay here, Tippett. You're not wanted any more. They tell me a man has been trying to buy this place from your dad. You better get him to sell, and both of you move on."

In stubborn anger Toby replied, "This is our home place; I was born here, and I intend to stay. I made a mistake. I've taken my whipping and learned my lesson. I'd like to be friends with you if I can. But friends or not, I'm going to stay!"

Hatred stood raw and deadly in Damon Frost's square face.

"No, you won't," he said in a quiet voice harsh as two rusty steel blades rubbing together. "I'll see that you go, or I'll see you dead."

He jerked his horse around and started him for the big corral gate. Just then old Sod Tippett came hobbling in from the barn.

"Howdy there, Damon," he said, beaming. "Been a long time since you were over here. My son's home. Did you see him?"

Damon Frost held up uncertainly, evidently not wanting to hurt the old man. They had been good friends a long time ago. "Yes, Sod," he said, "I saw him."

To Toby, Frost warned darkly, "You tell

your dad what I told you. I'm giving you a week to clear out. After that, you better watch yourself."

He spurred away then, sitting straight and proud in the saddle, his broad shoulders squared. Without a backward glance, Marvin Sand and the cowboy rode out a length behind him. Young Alton Frost held back a moment, looking at Toby. He winked, then spurred on to catch up with his father.

SOD STARED after them, not comprehending. "Damon wouldn't even light and talk," he murmured. "What's the matter with him, son?"

Toby's mouth twisted in bitterness. "I'm what's the matter with him. I didn't expect he'd ever like me again. But to hate me like that . . ."

The old man stood watching the riders trot their horses away on the trail that angled off across the flat toward the Frost ranch.

"I heard him tell you to leave, son. You figuring on going? You fixing to leave me again?"

Toby's jaw set grimly. He put his arm around his father's shoulder. "No, Dad. I'm not going to leave you."

Well past midafternoon, Alton Frost came back alone. He reined in at the front of the house and stepped down leisurely. He grinned up at Toby, who was on the roof, pulling out some bad shingles.

"Better climb down from there cowboy, before you fall off and mess up the front yard."

Grinning broadly, Toby climbed down. He clasped Alton's hand. "Say, you're a sight for sore eyes. I had a hunch you'd be back."

Alton laughed. "Sure. Had to wait till I could get loose from Pa. He's peculiar about some things, and you're one of them."

Toby's grin left him. "Alton, how come he's so bitter about me? I wouldn't expect him to greet me with open arms, but—"

Alton shook his head. "Like I said, cowboy, he's peculiar about some things. He's kind of a puritan, in a way. He hates anybody who steals anything. You were stealing from him; that makes it extra bad."

He grinned again. "Kind of funny in a way, ain't it? We all know Pa got his start when he was our age. If it hadn't been for moonlight nights, a fast horse, and a wide loop, he'd still be working for somebody else, for wages. But nowadays, you let anybody steal something from him and he's like a grizzly bear caught in a trap."

Uncomfortably Toby said, "You oughtn't to talk about your own dad like that, Alton."

Alton Frost shrugged. "It's the truth."

Toby frowned and changed the subject. "Tell me about Ellen."

"Oh, she's doing fine. She's got more brainless boys chasing after her than there are cattle in Tom Green County."

Toby hesitated with the question he really wanted to ask. "What about me, Alton? Reckon she ever thinks about me any more?"

Alton smiled. "Sure she does. The minute Pa heard you were back, he laid down the law to her. Said he'd shoot you if he caught you near her."

"And what did she say?"

"She told him she would see anybody she had a mind to, and she would sure be wanting to see you."

Toby's heartbeat quickened. He sat down on the little front porch, trying to keep from grinning as foolishly as he felt.

"When can I see her, Alton? When had I ought to go?"

Alton shook his head. "She said tell you not to risk coming over there. She'll come to you."

Incredulously Toby stared. "To me? That's even riskier."

"Not really. Our ranch adjoins yours on one side. She'll find some excuse to be riding in the next day or two. She'll slip across the east pasture and come over . . . Ellen's gotten to be a lot like us, Toby. She likes a little risk in everything she does. It's like the sweetening in coffee. Take it out, and the pleasure is gone."

Toby was disturbed by something in Alton's talk. He couldn't exactly put his finger on it; maybe it was the realization

that the old wild spark still burned in his friend, unquenched by the years that had drained the last of it from Toby.

FOR A WHILE Toby sat on the edge of the porch, staring past Alton to the tall gate posts at the far end of the corral, and even beyond them to the rolling rangeland that stretched on and on until it disappeared out of sight in a vague green line of cedar.

"Alton," he said, "there's something been bothering me. Since I've been gone, have you been . . ." It was hard to say. The words were right on his tongue, but a man couldn't just come right out with a thing like this. He had to go at it from the side, and halfway cover it up. But underneath, it was still the same.

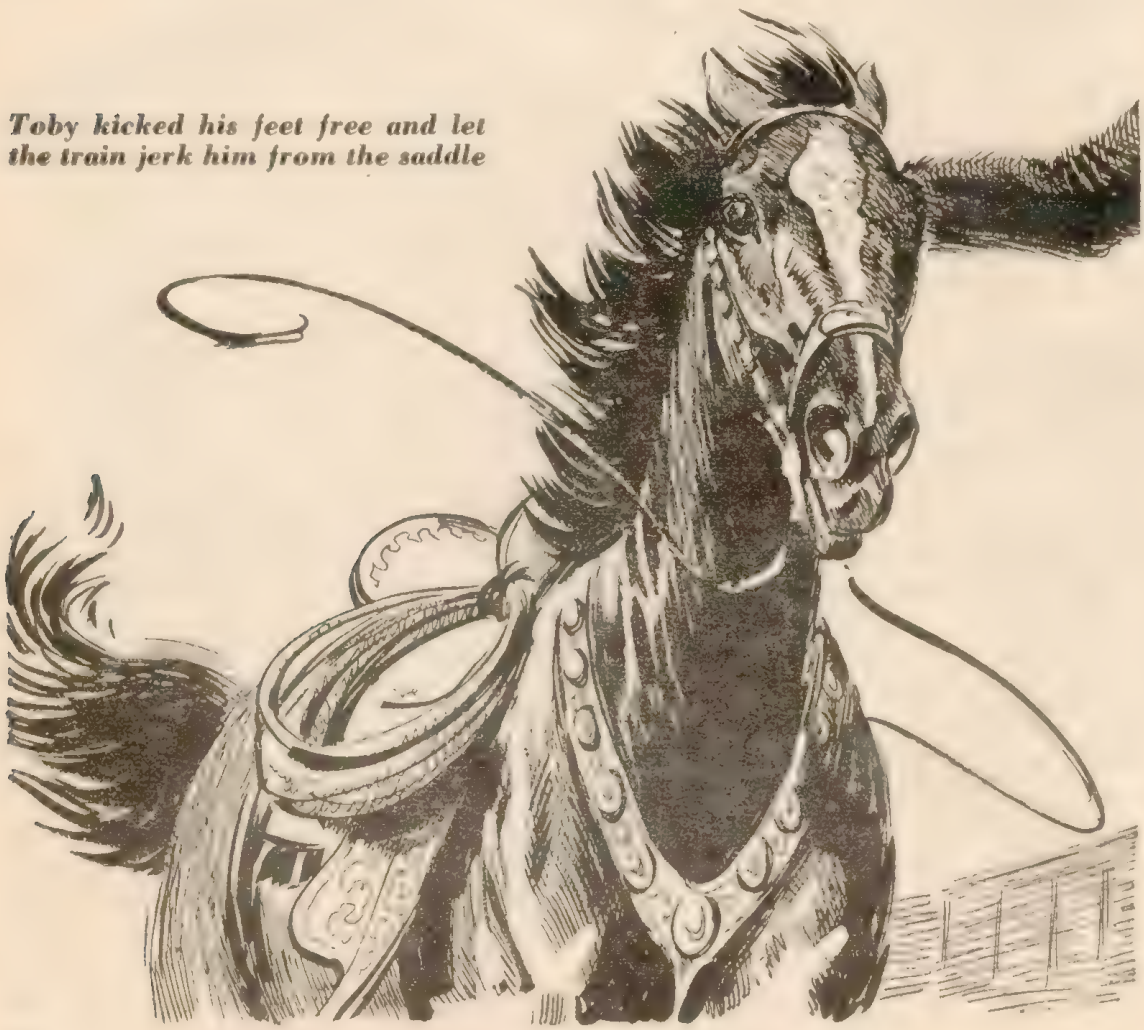
". . . have you been doing anything that you wouldn't want to tell Cass Duncan about?"

Alton laughed, but he didn't meet Toby's eyes for a moment. "Nothing serious, cowboy. Nothing serious." He looked behind him to be sure Sod Tippett was nowhere around. Then he leaned forward.

"Toby," he said excitedly, "we been hoping you'd get out soon, Marvin and I have. We've run upon a real good proposition. You ought to be in on it."

A coldness was growing in Toby.

Alton went on, "It's this, cowboy. You know they're building a new railroad down south of us. It's seventy miles away, but that's not too far. There's a man down there that'll take all the fat cattle we can drive to him. Splits the profits with us and doesn't



Toby kicked his feet free and let the train jerk him from the saddle

look at any brands. He comes up and meets us halfway. He butchers the cattle himself and sells the meat to construction workers on the railroad.

"It sure cuts down the risk, Toby. It's not near as bad as it used to be when we had to drive the cattle all over hell and half of Texas, and always take a chance on running into somebody. Now we cut out a few good ones here, a few there, make a fast night-and-day drive and they're off of our hands."

Disappointment was like a cold, wet blanket dropped across Toby's shoulders. "You been doing this very long?"

Alton nodded. "A good while."

"You'r dad's cattle along with the rest, I guess."

"He'll never miss them. He's got so much money now he doesn't know what to do with it. It makes him miserable, just thinking about it. In a way we're doing him a favor. Marvin and me have talked it over a right smart. You went to jail for us and never let out a peep. You've got something coming to you. How about it? The gravy's thick, and we've got a big spoon."

Toby stood up, stiff with the coldness he held inside him. He stared out across the pasture before turning back to Alton, his face clouding.

"You're not going to like this, Alton. But I wish they'd caught you. I wish they'd caught you and sent you up the way they did me."

Color leaped into Alton's face. His eyes glittered for a brief moment. "You don't mean that, cowboy."

"Yes, I do mean it. I hoped that what happened to me would be enough to teach you something. I learned, and now that it's over, I'm glad of it. But you never learned anything."

Alton stared in surprise and half anger. "That's the way it is, huh, cowboy?"

Toby nodded. "That's the way it is."

Woodenly Alton Frost walked out and swung up onto his horse.

"I'm sorry, Toby."

"I'm sorry, too."

Toby stood watching until Alton had ridden out of sight. An emptiness ached in him. There had been a close bond between them ever since they had been kids, playing together on a school ground and slipping over to the neighbors' ranches to rope their calves on the sly. Neither boy had had a brother, so they had been brothers to each other.

Now Toby sensed that this was all over, that it was being shoved behind him like the closing of a book.

He sat down once more on the edge of the porch, looking out across the ranch and not seeing any of it.

ELLEN FROST came just as Alton had said she would. Toby's breath came short as he hurried out to help her down from her horse.

She was a beautiful girl, more beautiful even than he had remembered her, if that was possible. She had dark, laughing eyes and soft, full lips that made a man's pulse quicken. She wore a tight-fitting white blouse that swelled outward, then pulled in slim and narrow at the waist. She was the kind of girl who made men stop and look back, and she knew it.

Toby would have crushed her to him, but she pushed him back, smiling coquettishly. "Let's not be in too big a hurry," she said, looking into his eyes.

His heart was pounding. "I've waited four years, Ellen. Would you say that I'm in a hurry?"

Her only answer was another teasing smile. "Four years. That's a long time, Toby. Lots of things can change."

In sudden worry he asked, "Have you changed, Ellen? Do you feel different about me now than you did four years ago?"

She parried the question. "I took a big risk in coming over, didn't I?"

He replied, "Yes. And I'm glad you did. If you hadn't, chances are I'd have gone over looking for you. It wouldn't have mattered if your dad had been waiting with a cannon."

That pleased her. "That's one thing I always liked about you, Toby. You were bold. You didn't let anything scare you. A little risk never bothered you at all."

Toby started to frown.

She went on. "And that's something that has worried me. Surely at some time or other you must have had a chance to break out. Why didn't you?"

Surprised, he asked. "Break out? Why?"

"Why, to be free, of course. You must have hated it there."

A sudden darkness began to come over him, like the one he had felt talking to the girl's brother. "You'd have wanted me to do that, Ellen?"

"Why not?"

Bitterly he said, "Because I'd never have been free. Loose, maybe, but not free. Everywhere I'd turn, I'd be looking for somebody with a gun. I couldn't have come home. All I could've done would be to run and keep running. Just like a coyote. It was better to wait. Now I can go to sleep at night and not lie awake wondering if they'll catch up with me tomorrow. I can look anybody in the eye and not have to flinch."

He looked levelly at her. "Isn't that a whole lot better, Ellen? Isn't it worth four years of my time?"

She smiled and touched his hand. "Sure. I guess you're right."

The way she looked, he couldn't help himself. He grabbed her and kissed her, hard. She finally drew away from him, smiling teasingly.

"Four years *have* changed you, Toby."

He was almost pleading with her. "Four years haven't changed me in what I want, Ellen. I want you. I want to marry you and bring you here to live. This is a good place. We can make it good. You won't be sorry. Please, Ellen, what do you say?"

The same smile lingered. "Like I said at first, Toby, let's not be in too big a hurry. Let's wait and see."

Disappointment brought a slump to his shoulders.

"Come on," she said, "get a horse and ride back to the boundary fence with me."

He rode along beside her, hoping for her to break down and say at least part of the things he had dreamed of her saying through four long years he had been away. She never spoke. Sitting straight in her saddle, she was only an arm's length away from him. Yet that lingering, teasing smile was like a barrier between them, making her as unreachable as a star.

They reached the fence that divided Sod Tippett's old place from the Frost ranch. Toby swung down and opened the wire gate.

Ellen said, "I'll be thinking about what you asked me. Watch for me. I'll be back to see you."

She leaned over then and touched her lips to his forehead, a kiss that wasn't really a kiss at all. It only brought an ache to Toby as he watched her ride away.

ANOTHER MAN was watching her ride away, too. Marvin Sand stood hidden in a thicket of mesquite, his face dark. He dropped a half-smoked cigarette and ground it beneath his boot heel. He stepped into the saddle and rode out of the thicket, angling across to meet Ellen Frost.

She pulled up in surprise, her face flushed. "Marvin! What are you doing here?"

His voice was flat. "Waiting for you to come back."

"You trailed me?"

He nodded. "And I saw what happened yonder by the gate. Stay away from him, Ellen. He's going to draw lightning."

She began to smile, the same teasing smile she had used on Toby. "Maybe I like the kind of man who draws lightning."

Marvin Sand edged his horse up against hers. "He's not your kind."

"And maybe you are?"

Angry color began to seep into his face. He reached for her, grabbing her arms. "You've seemed to think I was. I've stood by and let you run after other men because when it was over you always came back to me. But I'm not going to let you make a fool of yourself over some ex-convict."

Her tiny mouth dropped open. Her voice sharpened. "You'd have been a convict yourself, Marvin, only you never got caught."

In sudden fury Sand drew back and

slapped her so hard that she reeled in the saddle. "Don't ever say that!"

Ellen's nostrils flared. She grabbed the quirt that was looped on her saddlehorn. He threw up his arm to take the sharp bite of it. An angry cry swelling in her throat, she spurred away from him. She put her horse into a hard lope toward the Frost ranch headquarters.

Marvin Sand held back, the color still high in his face. He glanced once back toward the gate, where he had seen Toby Tippett. His fists clenched. Then he swung his horse about and followed in a stiff trot along the trail left by Ellen Frost. . . .

Toby Tippett was pleasantly surprised by the good shape his father had managed to keep the herd in. Toby spent a lot of time in the saddle, riding around over the ranch, looking at the cattle. It wasn't so much that they needed any care. The year was good. They were putting on a lot of tallow for the coming winter. And there was little doctoring to be done.

It was just that it felt so good to be riding out in the open, breathing the good air of the range country and knowing that he was free.

Riding back to the house late one morning, he saw the dun horse hitched out front, standing hipshot and switching flies. He read the brand as he rode by, but it was a new one to him. After unsaddling, he walked back to the house, curiosity working at him.

He recognized the gray-haired man seated in the house with his father. Paul English stopped puffing his pipe as he saw Toby enter. He stood up, leaving the big old rocking chair to rock by itself.

"By George, Toby," he said with genuine pleasure, "it's sure good to see you." He grasped Toby's hand.

Grinning at him, Toby warmed inside. He would remember Paul English till the day he died. English had been Damon Frost's foreman for many years. Toby had hired out to him many a time for extra cow work. English was a good man, the kind a growing boy watches and tries to follow

A lot of friendly talk passed between them. Finally English pointed the stem of his pipe toward the door, and Toby caught the hint.

OUTSIDE, away from Sod, English said, "Toby, I'd like you to tell me something. Where were you last night?"

Toby frowned, puzzled. "Why, I was here, Paul. With Dad."

"All night?"

"Sure."

English nodded. "I'm glad. I asked your dad in a roundabout way, and he said the same thing. So I know it's the truth."

Toby asked, "What's the matter, Paul?"

Grimness crept into his gray eyes. "Somebody was trying to run off some Long S cattle last night. Just happened that a couple of cowboys were on their way back from town and jumped them. The rustlers lit out."

"Anybody see who they were?"

English shook his head. "Too dark. Never got that close anyway. All they could tell was that there was two of them." He paused, drawing deeply on the pipe. "I was in town this morning, son. I imagine you can guess what people were saying."

A quick rush of despair hit Toby. "I reckon I can. But I didn't have a hand in it, Paul. I hope you believe that."

"I believe it. But not many will. Damon Frost will be calling for your scalp."

Toby clenched his fist. Damon Frost. The man's implacable hatred had long been a puzzle to him.

"Paul," he said, "you were just about the only one that ever spoke up for me during the trial. You even went in the face of Damon Frost to try to get me off light. I've always appreciated that. But I never understood it."

Paul English smiled. "Mainly, I reckon, because I knew there wasn't really anything mean about you. You were wild, but that's the kind of thing that generally wears off in time. I was pretty wild myself, once.

"There was something else, too. I knew that you and Dodd Parrish were protecting Alton Frost."

That came as a shock. "You knew? But how?"

"Working with a bunch of kids like you all were, a man gets to where he knows them pretty well. He can figure out lots of things for himself. That was another thing that made me try to hold Damon back. I knew that if he kept digging, his own son was going to be drug in too."

"You still working for Damon?"

English shook his head. "No. It never did set well with him, me talking up for you. Pretty soon I got a chance to buy the old Murchison place, so I quit the Frost outfit and went to work for myself."

"Then who's Damon's foreman?"

"Marvin Sand."

"Marvin?" Toby's eyes widened. A sudden, unpleasant picture came into his mind. As foreman, Marvin would know where to find the kind of cattle the butcher wanted, and know when it was safe to get them. He probably could even get by with false counts which would cover up the stealing.

English was eying Toby sharply. "Any reason Marvin shouldn't be foreman for Damon Frost?"

Evasively Toby said, "I don't know. I guess not."

But he could tell that he had planted a seed of suspicion in English. It showed in the man's face.

Beside his horse English paused a moment. "Toby, you've served your time. Don't let them get you sent back for something you didn't do. You better stop covering up for other people and think about yourself."

A knot of anger grew in Toby as he watched Paul English ride away. He had come home looking for a new start. He had asked nothing of anybody, except to be left alone and given a chance. Now he wasn't going to let a couple of careless cow thieves spoil the chance he had earned.

Sod Tippett came hobbling out to the barn as Toby saddled a fresh horse.

"I'm going to town, Dad," Toby said. "I don't know what time I'll be back."

The minute Sod spoke, Toby knew the old man's mind had dropped back into a worried time that had been gone for years.

"All right, son. But you hadn't ought to be going so much. Paul English was just telling me you've been making a good hand over at Frost's. He'd like to hire you full-time, only he says you've still got a little too much wildness in you. You run around a lot. Maybe you ought to stay home—"

With a tug at his throat, Toby said, "I will, Dad. I promise you, I will."

TOBY HAD no real plan. There wasn't much he could do except talk to Sheriff Cass Duncan, and lay the cards on the table. He wasn't going to implicate Alton Frost and Marvin Sand—not unless he had to. But he knew with a stolid certainty that he would do it, if it was the only way to keep out of jail.

He felt the brooding hostility in the faces of the men he rode past on his way to the big old courthouse. A nagging worry started. Maybe he had done wrong in coming here. Maybe he should have waited until they came after him.

But deep within him he knew he was right. He was sure he could make Cass Duncan believe him. And it would be better to convince Cass now than to wait until the suspicion had worked so deeply in him that it could not be dispelled.

Walking into Cass Duncan's office, he saw someone working behind a big shelf, cleaning out stacks of old papers.

"Cass," he called.

It wasn't Cass. Betty Duncan stepped out from behind the ceiling-high shelf. Her eyes warmed at the sight of Toby. It struck him again that they were beautiful eyes, gray and vital.

Flustered, he said, "Excuse me, Miss Duncan. I thought you were Cass."

She smiled. "So I gathered. But I'm not."

Her long brown hair, he noticed, was combed up and rolled into a tight, pretty bun at the back of her neck. "He went out to the Long S this morning with a bunch of men. He ought to be getting back pretty soon." Her eyes continued to smile at him. "I'm glad you came, Toby. Maybe you can help me put some of these papers back on the top shelf. It's hard for me to reach."

He climbed up onto a chair. She handed him some papers. Their hands touched, and a peculiar tingle ran through him.

Toby said, "You know what Cass went out there for, I reckon."

Her eyes told him the answer.

"I was home last night," he said urgently. It was suddenly important to him that this girl believe him. "I didn't know a thing about it till Paul English stopped by and told me. I came in to tell Cass I had no hand in it. I promised him I was going to stay straight. I meant it."

He looked down into her eyes and found them searching his face. He was glad he hadn't lied to her. He sensed that she would have known it.

"Dad'll be pleased to hear that from you," she said. "He didn't want to believe what some of them were saying about you this morning. You really convinced him the other day, Toby."

Her words brough him relief. He relaxed. Looking down at her, he said, "How about you, Betty? Were you convinced?"

She looked past him, her eyes pensive. "You didn't notice me much four years ago, Toby. I guess to you I was just a little girl then. But I noticed you. I was pulling for you all the way, and I'm pulling for you now."

Then, a tinge of red color in her face, she turned away from him and busied herself with the stack of papers and books.

A sudden stirring inside him, Toby watched her wonderingly. She had seemed only a kid then in her starched, schoolgirl dresses, her long brown hair braided and tied behind her head. He had often wondered why she was so eager to bake cakes and pies for him. Now he thought he knew.

The knowledge left a warm glow in him. Betty Duncan was no little girl now. He could see how a man could lose his heart to her in a hurry, if he hadn't already lost it to someone else.

CASS DUNCAN returned about half an hour later. The heavy sound of his footsteps preceded him down the courthouse hall. He stopped abruptly in the doorway as he sighted Toby sitting there.

Cass pitched his big dusty hat at a rack and missed. He paid no attention to that. He settled himself heavily into his chair and looked across at Toby, his gaze steady and questioning.

"I've been listening to everybody else all day," he said. "Now I want to hear what you've got to say."

Toby told him about Paul English's visit. "I haven't stolen anybody's cattle, haven't tried to, and don't intend to try to."

Cass Duncan stared at him, his gray eyes as inescapable as his daughter's had been. "You know something, Toby? I believe you. But you know something else? I believe you know who was trying to run off those cattle. You ought to tell me."

Toby looked away from him. "I've told you all I know."

The sheriff frowned. "All right, Toby, if that's how it is."

Then he gave the same warning which Paul English had made. "You're fixing to get hung on somebody else's rope, son. Don't let it happen."

It was seldom that Toby Tippett ever took a drink. He felt that he needed one now, bad. Stepping into the saddle, he swung around and angled down the street to the new place which was called the Equity Bar. He walked up the steps, then stopped short at the door. A good-sized bunch of men was inside, and among them was Damon Frost.

Toby knew he didn't want any trouble now, and stepping in there would be a sure way to get it. Slowly he started back down the steps, dismissing his need of the drink. He saw two men riding up the street toward him, and he hauled up short again. They were Alton Frost and Marvin Sand.

He swung into the saddle and pulled out to meet them. The anger built in him. He saw surprise flush into their faces.

"I want to talk to you two," he said shortly. "Let's ride out a ways."

Sand's gaze nervously swept up the street. "This isn't the time to do it, I don't think."

Angrily Toby said, "We'll do it now, and we'll do it right here, unless you turn

around and ride out to a better place with me."

Resentment smouldered in Sand's face as they rode out around a hill just south of town. Once he looked back over his shoulder.

"Afraid somebody'll see you with me, Marvin, and get the idea you might be a crook?" Toby asked acidly. Sand didn't answer.

Toby felt an old dislike swelling in him. He never had thought much of Marvin Sand, even when they had ridden together years ago. With Toby and Dodd and Alton it had been mostly just wildness that pushed them into rustling cattle. Wildness and thirst for adventure.

But with Sand, two or three years older than any of them, it had been something burned in Marvin Sand, a malice beyond Toby's understanding.

"This is far enough, I reckon," Toby said when they were behind the hill. He swung his horse around to face them. "You knuckleheads! Don't you know what you're doing to me? I don't intend to stand around here with my hands in my pockets while you two fools get me sent back to prison for something I didn't do."

Alton Frost stammered. "N-now, Toby, it wasn't our fault. There wasn't a chance in a hundred that we'd get caught. It was just bad luck. It's not going to happen again."

Furiously Toby exploded, "It better not happen again. There's something I want you two to get straight, right now. I covered up for you once, because I was as

They cut out a few which wouldn't be missed

else. It had been the money that had attracted him, a love of money that amounted to greed.

And with it had been a mean streak that had sometimes frightened the other boys. That streak had made him kill cattle for spite once when a posse had closed in and the young rustlers had had to abandon their stolen herd. And another time it had been all Toby could do to keep Sand from shooting Cass Duncan from ambush. Malice had

guilty then as you were. But I'm not going to cover up for you now. Get my tail in a crack and I'll spill the whole story."

Sand's eyes narrowed. There was poison in them. "You wouldn't, Toby."

"Yes," he said levelly, "I would."

Sand leaned toward him, grabbing Toby's shirt. "You ever say a word about us, Toby, and I'll kill you."

Toby's anger burst free. He drove his fist into Sand's ribs so hard that Sand al-

most fell out of the saddle. Sand took a futile swing at him. Toby hit him again, and this time Sand fell.

Instantly Toby was on the ground, just in time to see Sand get up. Sand rushed him. Toby faltered under the savage impact of Sand's hard fists. But he managed to hit Sand in the face, twice. Sand slowed a little.

Alton Frost had dismounted and was standing there helplessly.

He pleaded, "Let's stop this. You got no call—"

Rage boiled up in Marvin Sand's face. He drove into Toby again, his fists striking like sledges. Toby staggered backward and fell. Sand drew back a foot to kick him.

Alton grabbed Sand's shoulder. "Marvin," he cried, "you can't . . ."

In blind fury Sand smashed Alton in the face. Young Frost fell to one knee and stayed there, holding his hand to his bleeding mouth.

Sand whirled back on Toby. But the brief break had given Toby time to get part of his breath back. He never gave Sand a chance to balance himself. He dived into him, punching, slashing, pounding until Sand went down on his hands and knees.

Toby stood over him, his chest heaving. "You boys just . . . remember what I told you. I'm not going to jail . . . for anybody."

SOD TIPPETT was asleep when Toby got home that night. Hungry, Toby found a few cold biscuits without lighting the lamp. He went to bed.

Next morning he ached from the fight, and the bruises and cuts on his face were burning like grass afire. He walked out by the cistern and hauled up a bucket of water to wash his face. The water cooled him, but the fire soon came back.

Sleepy-eyed old Sod saw the bruises first thing.

"Horse fell with me," Toby lied.

The old man didn't believe him. Over his coffee, Sod said quietly, "Not taking to you very well, are they, son? I was afraid they wouldn't. It ain't the same now as it used to be. It'll never be the same again."

He sipped long at the scalding coffee. "Son," he spoke again, "what do you say we just up and leave? We can sell this place. We'll find us something somewhere else, where folks'll leave you alone."

Toby studied his father closely. "You think we could ever find a place we liked as well as we do this one?"

Sod didn't answer that directly. "That ain't the point, son. The point is . . ."

Toby interrupted him. "The point is that we wouldn't. So we're not going. They may try, but they'll never chase me off. Don't you worry yourself about it."

He rode out again that morning. When he came in at noon, he found Ellen Frost waiting for him. She sat in Sod's old rocking chair on the front porch, impatiently rocking back and forth. At sight of Toby she stood up quickly. Toby heard the clatter of cooking utensils inside the house.

Ellen hurried out to meet Toby as he swung down and looped one rein over the fence. She took Toby's arm and headed him toward the barn.

"Let's get out there where we can talk," she said quickly.

At the barn, out of sight of the house, Toby turned her around into his arms and kissed her. She gave little response, but she didn't try to stop him.

Huskily he said, "I've been thinking about you ever since you left."

She smiled, reaching up to pinch his skin. He flinched, because the bruises there sent pain knifing through him.

Ellen laughed. "You don't look so bad," she said. "Marvin's face is half blue."

Displeasure stirred in him. "They told you?"

"Why not? There aren't any secrets between Marvin, Alton, and me."

He turned loose of her. "You know what they've been doing?"

"Certainly. Sometimes I have to cover up for them with Pa."

Toby's face fell. A sickness started in the pit of his stomach.

Ellen went on, "Why do you want to be so hardheaded, Toby? Why don't you go along with them? Alton told me he made you a good proposition the other day. As long as people are blaming you anyway,

you'd just as well be getting something out of it."

A sense of disgust swept him. He turned away from her. "I was surprised enough at Alton," he said. "But you . . ."

"Surprised to find out that I've got some nerve, that I don't just sit at home and be a proper little girl with a pink ribbon in my hair? Maybe that's the kind of washed-out girl you want." Her voice rose angrily. "Well, that's not what I want to be. You've seen my mother. A dried-up, miserable little woman who shivers in fear every time Pa stomps into the house. She's scared to death of him all the time.

"You think I want to be like that? God knows Pa has tried hard enough to whip me into being that kind of a woman. But he hasn't been able to do it. No man ever will."

In despair, Toby said, "I think you better leave, Ellen. And maybe you'd better not come back."

Anger flared in her eyes and settled into disgust. "You're a fool, Toby."

He nodded. "Maybe. But I'm not a thief."

She slapped him so hard he stumbled back against the barn wall. She turned sharply and struck for the house in a fast, sharp stride. He stepped out and watched her. And suddenly he wasn't very sorry any more.

RUBBING his burning cheek, he wondered why it didn't hurt him more, watching her leave. She had shattered a dream that he had built through four long years. There was some regret, sure. But there wasn't the kind of ache he might have expected. Instead, there was almost a feeling of relief. Maybe the shock Alton Frost had given him had helped inure him.

Then his mind went back once again to a pair of wide gray eyes, and he thought he knew.

He had gotten no more than halfway back to the house when the horsemen came. Damon Frost, flanked by Marvin Sand and half a dozen cowboys. With them they were bringing back Ellen Frost, her shoulders squared defiantly. Toby knew they had trailed her here. He sensed what was coming.

For a moment he considered running for the house and getting a gun. He might be able to make it. But he knew they wouldn't leave until they had him. And they might hurt old Sod.

They reined up in front of him. Damon Frost leaned forward, his face clouded. "I gave you a warning the other day, Tippett. I told you to leave my daughter alone, and I told you to clear out of the country. You've done neither. Well, I made you a promise then. And now I'm going to keep it."

Marvin Sand and two cowboys stepped down. They rushed Toby. He stepped forward to meet them, his fists swinging. But in the space of two quick breaths they had grabbed him. Marvin Sand was standing directly in front of him, hate smouldering behind the dark blue splotches on his swollen face.

Frost glanced severely toward his daughter. "I warned you, Ellen. Now sit there and watch." To Marvin Sand he said, "Go ahead with it."

Sand's first fist plowed into Toby's stomach. Nausea swept him. The second blow struck his bruised face and brought slashing pain. For just a moment he saw Ellen's face and he found no sympathy there.

Malice leaped into Sand's darkened eyes. Then Toby's own eyes were closed by the merciless pounding of hard, hate-driven fists. He struggled vainly against the strong arms that bound him. Each blow drove him back a step nearer the deep, dark pit that yawned just beyond the whirling bursts of fire.

He heard Sod Tippett's enraged voice, but then Toby slumped, falling backward into that great pit.

Sod Tippett rushed out and down the steps, his old .30-30 rifle in his hands. "Damon Frost," he shouted hoarsely, "you leave my boy alone."

In fury Sod Tippett stopped and pointed the gun at the ashen-faced cowboys. It clicked harmlessly. Cursing, the old man fought at the bolt. But the rifle had jammed.

He came running then, grasping the rifle

by the barrel. The two cowboys made a rush for their horses. Marvin Sand stood there. Sod Trippett's gaze furiously fell upon him. He rushed Sand, swinging the rifle viciously. Sand caught the blow on his left forearm. His right hand grasped the barrel. For a moment he struggled with the old man.

Then he wrenched the rifle free and gave Sod Tippett a savage glancing blow on the forehead. The old man fell heavily. He got up on his knees again, blood trickling down the side of his face. Sand smashed the rifle against a rock.

Suddenly Sod Tippett was babbling incoherently. He swayed to his feet and staggered toward the unconscious Toby.

"Martha!" he began calling hoarsely. "It's our boy. Come help me with our boy."

Puzzled, Sand looked up at Frost. Damon Frost sat rigid in the saddle, his widened eyes on the staggering old man.

"Martha," Frost said, shaken. "That was his wife."

Sand swung into the saddle. "The old man's as crazy as a loon. Let's get out of here."

They reined their horses around and rode out in a stiff trot.

PAIN awakened Toby; his head throbbed as if someone was pounding on it with a sledge. He pushed himself onto his elbows and tried to open his eyes. He winced at the sharp pain of the bright sun, but he managed to get to his knees. His eyes were swollen almost shut. He could see the vague form of the house ahead of him. He tried to get there, but he stumbled and fell weakly. Pain rushed through him with sickening force.

He heard Sod Tippett's voice. "What's happened to you, son?" the old man said, almost whimpering. "That old Socks horse throw you again? I told you to be careful about him. He'll really hurt you some day."

Toby realized vaguely that Sod's mind had gone astray again. Socks was a mean horse Toby had ridden when he was about ten years old, one that had caused him many a skinned face and bloody nose.

Sod got hold of Toby and helped him up again. With the old man's support Toby got to the house and swayed over to the cistern. He pulled up a bucket of water and doused his face in it. After a while he could open his eyes enough to see. He saw the dried streak of blood on his father's face, and the broken rifle lying out there. He could imagine the rest.

Tenderly Toby reached up and touched the wound on his father's head. "They hurt you, Dad?"

Sod shook his head. "You and your mother, always worrying about a man. It's nothing. Horse took me under a low limb is all."

But that wasn't all. From the tracks Toby could tell pretty much what had happened. And the excitement had been a little too much for his father. Toby saw him grip his chest. He managed to rush forward in time to catch Sod Tippett as the old man fell.

It was after dark when Toby pulled the heaving team to a halt in front of the doctor's house in town and climbed down from the wagon. He tried to lift Sod out by himself. But he was still too weak to manage.

"Doc!" he called. "Doctor Will!"

In a moment Doctor Will Chambers came out onto his porch with a lantern held high.

"It's me, Doc, Toby Tippett. Dad's had a stroke."

Together they carried Sod into the house and eased him onto a cot. The physician took out his stethoscope and listened to Sod's heartbeat.

"I've been afraid of this," he said, "ever since he had that sick spell three years ago."

Toby had never heard about any sick spell. But his father wrote but seldom, and never much even then.

"It's all my fault, Doc," Toby said. "Maybe if I'd been here, if I hadn't caused him so much worry . . ."

The doctor glanced up at Toby. It was the first time he had really looked at him, and his eyes widened at the bluish, swollen face. But he never mentioned that.

"There wouldn't have been much you could've done about it, one way or the other. He caught pneumonia and it almost killed him. He was out of his head for a

week. He hasn't been the same since, Toby. You've seen what that spell did to his mind No, there wouldn't have been much you could do about it. He was old, and it just happened."

Toby sat in silence, letting that soak in. Somehow it left him feeling better. It lifted some of the guilt from his shoulders.

He hadn't been there long before Betty Duncan came in. She paled at the sight of Toby's swollen face. Then sympathy came into her eyes.

"I just heard, Toby. I came to see what I can do."

Toby shook his head. "There's not much any of us can do but wait."

She took hold of his hand. Warmth rose in him.

"I'll wait with you," she said. She sat down beside him.

IT WAS TWO DAYS before the doctor decided Sod Tippett was going to pull through. During those two days Toby saw Betty Duncan a number of times. Each time he came near her, he felt a little lightheaded, like he used to when he'd been in the old Mustang Saloon too long. He knew what was the matter with him, and it wasn't anything the old saloon had had to offer.

Toby noticed something else too. Cass Duncan was seldom around. He was always gone at night. Toby thought he knew the answer to that. The sheriff was staying out in the country, hoping to jump those cattle thieves if they made another try. So far as Toby knew, they hadn't tried. He hoped they had been scared for good. But he knew within reason that they would try again.

In town, Toby was conscious of the half-hidden hostility which followed him wherever he went. He felt it when men broke off their conversations as he walked by. He sensed it when women passed him on the street and kept their eyes averted.

Only with Betty Duncan could he put aside the growing bitterness in him. So he was glad to return to the ranch when the doctor told him it would be all right. . .

The sharp thud of hoofbeats brought him straight up in bed. He was wide awake in an instant, and one thought stabbed him. It's gone bad with Dad, and they're coming to tell me.

He pulled on his boots and the pants which he had left hanging on a corner of the iron bedstead. He was fully dressed and waiting on the porch when the riders came up. His heart was pounding hard.

Silver moonlight splashed upon the men, and he saw that he had been wrong. They were Marvin Sand and Alton Frost. Alton was slumped over the saddlehorn, wounded.

Toby grabbed hold of him. He eased him out of the saddle and onto the porch. His hand came out from under Alton's back warm and sticky, and even in the moonlight he could see the dark smear of blood. The boy's throat rasped as he struggled to breathe. He was dying—there wasn't much time.

Sand never dismounted. "They jumped us over on Paul English's place. There was a bunch of them, and they were on us before we knew it. After they hit Alton, I managed to get him away. But they're close behind us. You can hear them now, if you listen hard."

Toby's heart leaped. Yes, he could hear the hoofbeats. Anger swept through him. "You led them here? You fool, don't you know how that'll look for me?"

He could feel the hard grin on Marvin Sand's hat-shadowed face. "Sure, Toby, I knew how it would look. That's why I led them here. Keep them company. I'm riding on."

Wheeling his horse around, he spurred away. In the first flush of helpless rage Toby dashed for the door, wanting a gun. But he stopped, realizing that it would be useless now.

He dropped on his knees beside Alton Frost. He could hardly hear the breathing now. Desperate, he knew he had to keep Alton alive, had to keep him alive until the posse got here. Only Alton's word could clear him of the implication which Marvin Sand's coming here had made.

The posse rode in cautiously, guns ready, a circle of men drawing a tight noose around the little ranch house. Toby waited quietly,

standing in the moonlight where they could all see him.

"It's all right, Cass," he called. "Come on in."

CASS DUNCAN stepped down from his horse, the gun in his hand catching a glint of moonlight. "Better raise your hands, son."

Toby did. "I haven't got a gun on."

He pointed his chin toward Alton Frost. "You better see after Alton, Cass. He's about gone."

Someone exclaimed, "I told you we got one of them. I told you I saw him almost fall."

Instantly Cass was on his knees beside young Frost.

Toby said, "They rode up here just a couple or three minutes ago."

"They?"

"Alton and Marvin Sand."

Cass said, "There's nobody here but you and Alton. And we were chasing just two men."

Panic rising in him, Toby tried to explain. But he could see disbelief and disgust in the dark, shadowed faces that surrounded him.

"Alton will tell you the truth of it, Cass," Toby exclaimed in desperation. "Ask him. Ask him before it's too late."

Cass Duncan's voice was flat and hard. "It *is* too late. Alton has just died. . . ."

Riding in, he felt the sheriff's eyes upon him, hard as flint. "You oughtn't to've come back, Toby. Cattle stealing was bad enough. At least they couldn't do anything worse than send you to prison for it. But murder is something else."

"Murder?" Toby's chest tightened. "What murder?"

"You shot Paul English tonight. He got a little too close, and your slug caught him. We sent him to town in a wagon. But he looked like he didn't stand much chance."

Paul English! Toby slumped in the saddle. The only man left who would have believed him, would have fought for him.

Toby became angry with himself. It needn't have happened this way. If he had told what he knew the first time Cass asked him, this wouldn't have happened. But he had held back. Minding his own business, he had told himself. Hoping Alton Frost would come out all right.

Now it was too late to talk, because there was no one who would listen, no one who would believe.

But he found himself wrong.

Betty Duncan was standing in front of his cell door ten minutes after Cass had clanged it shut. Her gray eyes glistened. Her slender hands trembled if she did not hold them tightly together.

"Toby," she said, and then stopped talking because she could not hold down the tremor in her voice. But her eyes told the rest of it. He reached through the bars, and her hands came into his.

"Betty," he whispered, "they won't believe me."

"I believe you, Toby."

Cass Duncan finally came back from the doctor's. Toby asked him, "What about Paul English?"

Cass shot him a hostile glance and turned his back, shrugging. "Fifty-fifty chance."

THE SHERIFF sat down heavily in his chair, his shoulders slumped. He and Paul English had made many a cow camp together in years past. They'd gone off hunting together many a time.

Toby waited a while before he tried talking to the sheriff again. "Look, Cass," he said, "I feel as bad about this as you do. I didn't have many friends left, but Paul English was one of them. I didn't shoot him, Cass. Believe me."

Cass Duncan sat there for a time in thoughtful silence. Finally he said, "I wish I could believe you."

Toby pressed, "I've told you it was Marvin Sand who was with Alton last night. You don't have to take my say-so on it. Make Marvin prove where he was. He won't be able to do it. Then maybe you can find his gun and see if it didn't fire the bullet that hit Paul."

Cass Duncan swung around. His hard gaze probed Toby's face. "All right Toby. But you better not be making a fool of me this time."

He was gone all day. He came in late in the afternoon, when the reddening, bar-crossed sunlight that entered Toby's cell window was easing up toward the plaster ceiling. The sheriff's shoulders sagged, and weariness cut deep lines into his beard-shadowed face. But a dangerous fire smouldered in his tired eyes.

"You lied to me, Toby."

Heartbeat lifting, Toby stood erect.

Cass said, "I found somebody who vouched for him, Toby. He was at the ranch all night."

A cold numbness gripped Toby. He sensed the rest of it, even before Cass told him.

"Ellen Frost. She said he was with her . . . ."

The word came next morning. Paul English was going to live.

Betty Duncan was the one who told Toby. He turned away, standing in front of the window a long moment, swallowing down the tightness in his throat.

"He's not conscious yet," Betty told him. "But his heartbeat has gotten stronger. Doc Chalmers said he's sure Paul will make it all right."

Toby faced back toward the girl. "Betty, maybe Paul got close enough to know who it was that shot him. When he wakes up and tells, they'll have to turn me loose. They'll know I wasn't lying."

Suddenly a grim realization came to him. His face fell. "Marvin Sand will think of that too."

Betty's eyes widened. "You think he might try to kill Paul?"

Toby said, "I know he would. You better get Cass, Betty."

Cass Duncan stared at him in cold disbelief. Contempt lay coiled in his eyes as he listened to Toby's desperate plea.

"You've got to get somebody over there to guard Paul," Toby cried. "Everything I've told you is the truth. You can't just stand by and let Marvin kill him."

Cass said flatly, "You've lied to me too many times, Toby. You're not going to make a fool of me again."

He turned his back and started to leave the jail.

"Cass," Toby called after him, "I swear I'm not lying to you. You can't just turn your back."

Cass whirled on him, his eyes ablaze. "Toby, I've got one solitary confinement cell back yonder, padded all around, without any windows. Say one more word to me and I'll throw you in it!"

He stomped out. Toby sank back onto the cot, face fallen in despair.

Cass Duncan's lean, stoop-shouldered deputy came in a while later. "Hungry?" Toby shook his head.

"Betty Duncan's bringing you some supper anyway," the deputy said. "Was I her, I wouldn't even give you a burnt biscuit. But then, I ain't her."

The deputy unlocked the cell door when Betty came in. She gave Toby a quick, half-scared smile, then uncovered a platter with biscuits, fried beef, and some dried fruit on it. She had also brought a small pot of coffee.

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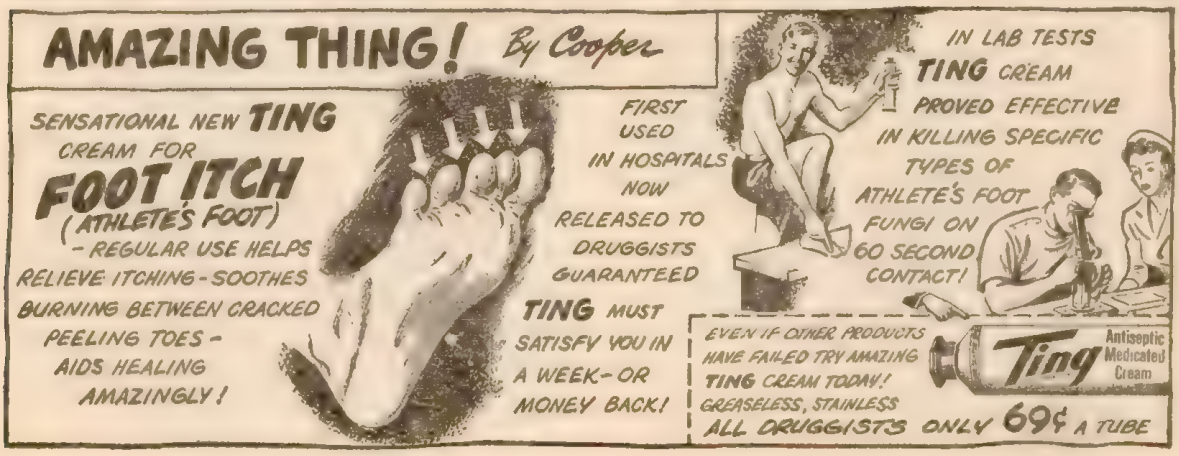
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Toby's heart went into his brief smile. "Thanks, Betty." Then his chin sank. "I guess you know Cass won't listen to me. He won't put a guard on Paul. Marvin'll kill him, and there's not one thing I can do to stop him."

BETTY touched Toby's hand, a quick, fleeting touch that left a warm glow. "Maybe there is something you can do about it, Toby. Don't worry. Just eat your supper and drink all your coffee. All of it."

He soon had eaten all he could of the supper. He was pouring the third cup of coffee when he heard the metallic click inside the pot. Betty's words came back to him in a rush. "Drink all your coffee." He looked up quickly to see if the deputy had heard the faint noise. But if he had, he gave no sign.

Cautiously Toby took the lid off the pot. There, sticking up out of the remaining coffee, was one end of a long key. Toby fitted the lid back in place and looked up again, hoping his sudden excitement didn't show in his face.

After a while the deputy took a heavy old watch out of his vest pocket. "Well," he said, jokingly, "I got a few rounds to make. I won't be long. You just stay here till I get back."

Toby's heart was in his throat. He waited a long minute after the deputy was gone. Then, quickly, he took the key out of the coffee pot. He stepped up to the door and fitted it into the lock outside. He fumbled a moment, a choking fear rising in him that this wasn't the right key, that Betty had made a mistake.

Then he heard a click, and the door swung open under his weight. He looked longingly at the gun chest in a corner. But it was locked, and he couldn't afford to spend time in hunting for a key. There were no loose guns around.

Lamplight bathed the front door. He couldn't go out that way. He hurried to the back door and tried it. It was unlocked. He knew he could thank Betty for that. He stepped out into the darkness.

"Toby!"

He spun around. He made out the shadowy form of the girl hurrying toward him. "Betty," he breathed.

She came into his arms, and he held her tightly. He found her lips.

When they stepped apart, she put something heavy and cold into his hand. A six-shooter.

"One of Dad's," she said. "Now let's move away from here before John comes back and finds out you've left."

They kept to the shadows, moving quietly but hurriedly along at the backs of the town buildings toward the doctor's house.

Once somebody stepped out of a door. Toby flattened against a wall, holding his breath, while Betty held tightly to him. The man flung a panful of water out onto the ground and stood there a minute, biting off a fresh chew from a plug of tobacco while he looked around. But the lamplight inside evidently had blinded him against the darkness. He never seemed to notice the man and the girl.

In a few minutes they reached the back of the doctor's house.

Pointing, Betty said, "That's the room where Paul is. Your dad is in a room on the other side."

Toby studied the house. He figured what he would do in Marvin Sand's place. Safest thing would be to shoot from outside through a window. That way, he could get away in a hurry.

Next to the doctor's home was a house set up on wooden blocks. The bottom was boarded up, but a big open space was left unboarded beneath the high front porch, probably to let the family dog sleep under there. Toby motioned toward it.

"I'm going to wait under there," he said quietly. "It gives me a good view of Paul's window, and it's in range. It's dark enough that nobody can see me. You better get along now, before Cass misses you."

Betty shook her head. "I'm staying here with you."

Firmly he said, "I don't want you getting hurt. Go on."

She started to argue with him, but stopped as they heard a plodding of hoof-

beats. Somebody was riding down the street toward them. Without hesitation Betty ducked under the high porch. There was nothing else Toby could do. He followed her.

The rider went on by. Then sounds of excitement burst over toward the courthouse square. Toby could hear running feet, and someone shouting. Old John had returned to the jail and found Toby gone.

It wasn't many minutes before searching riders and men afoot began working up and down the streets and alleys, nosing into all the dark places. Toby crawled farther back under the house, and Betty crawled back with him. He knew he ought to make her leave, but she didn't want to. And touching her warm, slender hand, he didn't want her to leave now.

Presently the search died down.

"I reckon by now Cass knows how I got out," Toby whispered. "You ought to've gone home when I told you."

She shook her head and touched her cheek to his arm. "I'm where I want to be, Toby, with you."

THERE was no warning before the shooting started. Toby and Betty knelt together, watching carefully where they thought the killer might come. But they never saw him before the two sudden shots shattered the night stillness. The man and the girl exchanged one swift, terrified glance, then both burst out from under the porch in a hard run.

More shots sounded from inside the house. A rider spurred out from the other side of the building. A quick shaft of moonlight touched him—Marvin Sand.

Heart hammering, Toby dropped to one knee and fired. Sand leaned low over his saddlehorn. His gun came up, and dust leaped at Toby's feet. Toby squeezed the trigger again.

He saw the second flash of fire just as Sand's bullet sent him reeling, to sprawl in the sand.

Betty screamed and rushed to him. She grabbed up the fallen gun and fired futilely at the horseman who was spurring away. The darkness swallowed him up.

Toby fought for breath. The girl dropped to her knees beside him and sobbed, "Toby, where did he hit you?"

Toby pushed onto his knees, supporting himself with his left hand. His right hand felt along his ribs, searching for the source of the hammer-like throbbing.

"My ribs," he gritted finally. "Creased them a little. Knocked the breath out of me."

Running feet thudded on the soft ground, and from somewhere came the sudden clatter of horses' hoofs. A shadow fell across the man and the girl. Cass Duncan stopped there, a smoking gun in his hand.

"You hit, son?"

Toby didn't answer the question. Instead he asked fearfully, "What about Paul? Did he get him?"

The sheriff was slow in replying. "No, Toby, he didn't get Paul."

Cass Duncan helped Toby to his feet. Betty's arm went around Toby, supporting him. She was trying to keep from crying.

"This clears him, doesn't it, Dad?" she begged in a breaking voice.

Cass said, "Well, it does put a different complexion on things. It doesn't clear you all the way. But at least it shows you weren't lying about Marvin Sand. The funny thing is, I had a notion you were going to try to kill Paul yourself, when we found you had gotten out. I was in Paul's room, waiting for you to try it."

A dozen or more men were crowding around the trio. They made room as Cass, Toby, and Betty started toward the doctor's house. Toby felt his strength seeping back into him, and the pain in his ribs was easing down to a dull throbbing. Just a crease.

At the front door, Cass Duncan stopped. "Toby, before you go in, I better tell you. Marvin Sand picked the wrong window, and he got the wrong man."

Toby choked, a sudden rush of panic sweeping through him. Betty's hand tightened quickly on his arm.

He whispered, "Dad?"

Cass nodded, his head down. "I'm sorry, Toby."

The first rush of grief passed, and in its place grew a burning anger. Toby sat motionless while the doctor bound his ribs. But his fists were clenched, and his lips were drawn flat and hard. With his returning strength came determination.

Betty Duncan laid her hand on his arm. "Lie down and try to get some rest, Toby. Dad has taken a bunch of men out to the Frost ranch. If Marvin tried to go back there, they'll get him.

Toby shook his head. "I'm not going to rest, Betty, till I've gotten Marvin Sand."

A NAGGING WORRY kept working at him. What if Marvin didn't go back to the Frost ranch? He had seen his plan blow up in his face. Chances were good that he would not dare return to the ranch. Where would he go?

And suddenly Toby thought he knew. Marvin and Alton had been taking their stolen cattle to somebody down south who was selling the beef to railroad construction workers. The three of them were splitting the profits, Alton had said.

What if there were still some unsplit profits down there? Toby knew Sand's greed. He knew Sand wasn't the kind to go off and leave any money behind him. The idea became a certainty with Toby. Half an hour later he was on a horse and heading south. . . .

He found the railroad. There was still a shiny newness to the rails. Although the ties already were beginning to show dark stains from coal and dirt-laden steam, they were fresh and new, the ends not scored or cracked. Toby headed west, following the tracks toward a drifting trace of coal smoke far ahead.

Up near the end of track he found the settlement. There had been a little trading post and post office down here for years. They called it Faraway, because the man who first established it moved off in disgust, declaring that it was too far away from civilization ever to amount to anything.

Faraway now was a booming little construction town. Later on, it probably would die again. But right now it was living high. Tents, slapped-together shacks, and wheel-mounted business houses set off on side tracks had all but swallowed up the original old trading post. There were lots of men here. A good market for beef, Toby mused, watering his horse in a wooden trough and taking a wide, sweeping look.

A saloon would be the best place to pick up information. He sought out the crudest, meanest-looking one of the lot.

It was about as bad inside as it was outside. The saloon was really a big patched tent, the sides walled up with old warped boards which still had some loose nails sticking out of them. The bar was two more such boards nailed down across four empty kegs. And behind the bar slouched a bartender who likely hadn't had a bath since the last time he got caught out in the rain.

Toby ordered a drink and sat down at a crude scrap-lumber table with it. Nervousness prickled him. He didn't want to seem eager, but he didn't have any time to waste.

After a while he sidled back up to the bar.

"Say," he asked quietly, "where could a man sell some fat cattle around here? Who's the butcher for this outfit?"

The bartender scratched his chin under a mat of whiskers which could not properly be called a beard, even though they were long enough.

"Well, there's an outfit owned by John Pines that has a contract with the railroad. Then, there's a couple of old boys that do butchering to sell beef around the camp."

Toby looked back over his shoulder as if making sure nobody was listening.

"I need to find me a butcher who can keep his mouth shut."

The bartender's eyes lighted. "Stolen cattle?"

"Now," Toby drawled, "I wouldn't go so far as to say that. Just say there's a little room for argument about them, and I don't especially enjoy arguments."

The bartender grinned and poured Toby another drink. "The man for you to see is Bud Spiller. He won't pay as much as

the others, but he can't tell one brand from another. And he don't watch over his shoulder as you leave."

BUD SPILLER'S CAMP was south of the railroad, out in the brush, according to the bartender's directions. Spiller had some holding pens down there, and some Mexican workers to skin and dress the beef. He hauled it to the construction camp in a tarp-covered wagon.

The wind was out of the south, and Spiller's place wasn't hard to find. First thing Toby located was a Mexican dragging offal and cattle's heads away on a mule-drawn sled. At a rotting, stinking dump ground the man stopped, tipped the sled over, and headed back toward camp in a long trot, getting away from the foul stench.

At sight of Toby riding up to camp, a Mexican shouted something. A man stepped out of a big shack and strode forward. This, Toby guessed, was Bud Spiller. Spiller was a medium-tall, soft-bellied man with stubble beard. His hairy arms were bloody most of the way to his rolled-up sleeves. Dried blood speckled his dirty clothing. He scowled darkly at Toby.

"What do you want here?"

"You Bud Spiller?"

The man nodded. "And I got lots to do. If you got business, get it over with."

Toby took his time, getting a good look at the camp. "I got some cattle to sell," he said. "I heard you might be the man to buy them."

Spiller grunted. "I ain't interested." He turned away. He took a couple of steps, then turned around again. "I might be, if they was cheap enough."

"I'd make them cheap enough," Toby said, "if I knew you'd keep your mouth shut about where they came from."

Spiller's eyes widened a little. "They stolen?"

Toby rubbed his chin. "Well . . . I come by them awful easy."

He thought he saw a face behind a window in the shack. But as he squinted for a better look, the face disappeared. His heartbeat quickened.

Spiller's whiskered face frowned darkly. "Where'd you get the idea that I'd buy stolen cattle?"

Toby hesitated, then decided to throw in the whole stack of chips. "Friend of mine told me. Man named Marvin Sand."

In one unguarded moment the name brought a quick leap of surprise into Spiller's muddy eyes, and his mouth dropped open a little. He glanced quickly back over his shoulder, toward the shack. Then, as if realizing this had been a trap, he gripped himself. His face tightened.

"Get out of here," he snarled.

Toby's gun leaped into his hand. He swung to the ground, keeping the gun muzzle on Spiller. "I've got a hunch he's in that shack yonder," he said. "You're going to go in front of me. If he makes a wrong move, I'll kill you."

Spiller's jaw was bobbing. His throat swelled as he tried to force the words out. But fear choked them off. He turned woodenly and started toward the shack.

The Mexicans had all stopped work and were watching. Toby didn't think they would try to interfere with him. They were hired laborers, probably being paid just enough to eat. Chances were they wouldn't risk injury by interfering.

"Come on out, Marvin," Toby shouted. "Don't try anything, or I'll shoot Spiller."

There was no answer from inside. Toby repeated his order, and still he heard nothing. A doubt began to work at him. Maybe he was wrong. Maybe Marvin wasn't here at all. But he *had* to be.

Toby heard a sharp whirr, and he jerked around too late to dodge the hatch flying at him. The flat edge struck the brim of his hat and flattened it against Toby's head. He saw a blinding flash of light, then dropped limply to the ground.

IN A DREAMY, half-real world, he sensed the tread of boots in the sand. He forced his eyes open enough to see the boots halted in front of him, swaying back and forth, back and forth. A voice broke through the fog.

"You've killed him." Fright lifted Bud Spiller's voice to a high pitch. "You'll get me hung, Marvin."

Even in half consciousness, Toby knew the other voice.

"He's not dead. But we better kill him. He'll talk, and you'll do a stretch where he just come from," Marvin Sand said.

"No," Spiller said, his voice wavering, "we're not going to kill him. I can stand a stretch for butchering stolen cattle, but I don't want to hang."

Sand shrugged. "Have it your own way. But I'm leaving. Give me my money. I'm getting out of the country."

The walked into the shack. His head clearing, Toby tried to push himself up onto his hands and knees. He could hear the voices inside the shack.

"Here's for that last bunch you and Alton brought me. I reckon you get his share now," Spiller said.

There was a brief silence, then a chuckle. "That's a right smart of money you got there, Bud. Ain't you afraid to keep that much on you?"

"There's no better place that I know of. I couldn't leave it lying around this camp. I sure wouldn't take it to Faraway. Too many crooks around there. Best thing is to keep it on me. I always got a gun to . . . Marvin, don't point that thing at me."

Sand chuckled again. "I won't hurt you, Bud, not if you don't give me any trouble. Just hand over that money."

Spiller's voice was shrill with outrage. "It's mine, Marvin! My share of what we made together. We split the profits even, you and me and Alton."

Toby heard a sharp cry, then a clubbing sound like a butcher axing a steer.

A moment later Marvin Sand strode out of the shack, his pockets bulging. He stopped beside Toby. Toby's heart hammered in helplessness. He knew Sand was considering whether or not to shoot him.

Then Sand turned away. He walked out to a small shed and reappeared astride a horse. He touched spurs to the animal and swung northward in an easy lope.

Toby pushed himself up and swayed toward a bucket he saw on a bench by the shack. The bucket was half full of water, and he splashed some of it on his face, soaked a handkerchief in it, and held it to his swollen forehead, where the flat side of the hatchet had struck.

The cool water cleared his head. He went back to where he had fallen and picked up his gun. He heard a scraping sound at the door of the shack. Bud Spiller was dragging himself out. Blood trickled down his face from a ragged wound.

"Where was he going, Spiller?" Toby demanded.

Spiller sagged, bracing himself against the door. Despair was stamped in the heavy lines of his face. "Train. Going to catch the evening construction train east. Go get him, friend. He's all yours."

Toby lifted himself stiffly into his saddle and spurred out, heading north after Marvin Sand. For a moment or two he thought he might fall, but he gripped the horn, and soon there was little weakness left. From the north he heard the whistle of a train.

He broke out onto a hilltop that gave him a long look down toward Faraway. And yonder, just starting to pull away, was the eastbound construction train. A cold certainty gripped Toby. Marvin Sand was on that train.

TOBY SLANTED his horse a little eastward. It took a while for the train to begin working up speed. A mile east of town the road made a bend around a rocky hill that had been too mean to blast out. The train would travel slowly until it passed the bend, Toby thought. Counting on that, he headed for the bend.

He hauled up at the bend, moments ahead of the train. He held his winded horse alongside the track and waved his hat frantically.

The frightful racket of the engine bearing down upon them threw the horse into a frenzy. He fought back away from the tracks. In desperation, Toby kept on waving his hat. But as the train passed, the grinning engineer waved back. Some cowboy seeing his first train, he probably thought.

Still yelling, Toby touched spurs to the horse and broke into a long-stretching lope

alongside the train. The cars were rapidly pulling away from him. He crowded in, trying to grab hold of something and pull himself up onto the train.

The cars were passing him, one, and then another, and then a third. It was a short train, and there weren't many more left. Toby kept spurring hard, the rough ground flying by beneath him. One misstep could throw him under the wheels.

He caught a flashing glimpse of a face as an empty flat car went by. Marvin Sand.

The grade flattened out, and the train was picking up speed. Yelling at his horse, fighting at the reins, Toby crowded him in once more. He grabbed at an iron bar. It jerked out of his hands. He grabbed at another. This time he got a good hold. He kicked his feet free and let the train pull him away from the saddle.

His body slammed hard against the side of the car, and for an agonizing moment he thought he would fall. He glimpsed the railroad ties whisking by beneath. He held onto the bar, and found a foothold.

He pulled himself up onto the swaying car and looked behind him. Way back yonder his horse was still running, pulling away from the train. Another moment and he would have lost the race.

Toby drew his gun and started moving forward, crouched low. Marvin Sand must have been watching him, hoping he would fall. Now, he would be waiting.

A bullet tugged at his sleeve, and the sharp blast of a gunshot burst almost in his face. Without time to aim, Toby squeezed off a hasty shot at the hat which was ducking beneath the top of the next car. Splinters flew. Toby rushed forward.

Another bullet reached for him from beneath the roof of the car. Marvin was between two cars, holding onto a ladder and shifting positions for each shot. Toby sent a second bullet at the edge of the car and kept pushing forward. He jumped the space between the two rumbling cars, and then he was on the car behind which Marvin was waiting. Sand bobbed up. He fired rapidly, one shot, two, three. Toby sprawled flat, the bullets singing over him.

SAND STOPPED shooting then, and Toby knew why—his gun was empty. Toby lurched onto his feet and ran ahead, toward the end of the moving car. Sand was fumbling with his gun, trying to reload it. At the sight of Toby rushing toward him, he hurled the gun.

Toby ducked it. Sand climbed up onto the car and came rushing to meet him. He grabbed at Toby's gun.

Toby was aware that the train was slowing down. Aroused by the crash of gunfire, the engineer was putting on the brakes. Up ahead, just behind the engine, someone climbed onto a car and was coming on the run. He had a shotgun in his hands.

Toby's feet slipped, and he fell backward. Marvin crashed down on top of him. Marvin's knee drove into Toby's bound ribs. Toby cried out in pain. His hand involuntarily relaxed, and Marvin wrenched the gun from his fingers. Sand jumped back onto his feet. He brought the gun down into line, his face twisted in hatred.

Then the brakes grabbed hold. The car lurched suddenly and Sand's feet slipped. He struggled for footing, then he plunged backward between the two cars. His wild scream cut off short.

Ribs aching, Toby was down off the side of the car the moment the train stopped. He trotted back down the tracks toward the twisted form he could see lying there.

He stopped short, his eyes widening. His face drained white, and he turned back.

Two smoke-blackened train men came hurrying. One of them held the shotgun on Toby, but he paid little attention to it.

"What's this all about, boy?" one of the men demanded.

Toby motioned toward the body. "He killed a man over in Patman's Lake yesterday. I was trying to take him back."

The trainman lowered the gun. "Well," he commented, "there ain't hardly enough left now to take back. . . ."

Despair bore down like a leaden weight in Toby as he rode northward to Patman's Lake. Ahead of him was the grim task of burying his father.

Toby's consuming anger had burned itself out after the fight on the train. No

longer was there any hatred in him. But the grief remained, and he had the whole trip in which to think about it. There was so much he had wanted to do for old Sod Tippett, so many wrongs to make up for.

Something else was eating at Toby as he rode back across seventy far-stretching miles of cow country. A cloud of suspicion would always hang over him now. Marvin Sand could have cleared him, but Sand was dead. So was Alton Frost. As for Bud Spiller, the man had cleared out, just as Toby had figured he would. Toby had ridden back to Spiller's slaughtering camp and taken Faraway's marshal with him, but Spiller was gone. The country was big, and Spiller had his start.

TOBY NEVER even went by the ranch. He rode on into Patman's Lake. His shoulders sagged, and his body ached all over. He paid scant attention to the men who watched him from a dozen porches and doorways. Stiffly he swung down at the courthouse square and walked to the big open doors.

Betty Duncan was waiting for him. Her wide eyes shone as she rushed forward to meet him. He folded her in his arms, pressing his cheek to her soft hair while she buried her face against his chest. . . .

Later Cass Duncan shook Toby's hand with a genuine pleasure. "We got the news from Faraway by telegraph," he said. "Sure glad you weren't hurt."

Toby nodded, murmuring his thanks.

"I didn't want Marvin to die, Cass," Toby said. "I wanted to bring him back to clear me. Now there's no way to do it. As long as I live, people will be wondering if I was with Marvin and Alton."

Betty shook her head. "No they won't Toby. They know the truth."

Toby stared at her. For the first time he noticed the thin blue color that ringed one of her eyes, and the red-tinged, angry-looking mark that reached down her cheek.

"I had a hunch Ellen Frost could tell the whole story if she wanted to," Betty said. "So I went out there. We had a long talk. When we got through, she told everything, Toby. She cleared you."

Relief washed over Toby. Gratefully he squeezed the girl's hands. "How about Ellen?" he asked, smiling. "Does she look as bad as you do?"

Betty smiled back. "Worse."

"And Damon Frost?" Toby asked. "How's he taking this?"

Cass frowned. "Pretty hard. I think he knew all the time that Alton had outlawed on him. And Ellen had gone wild, too. Damon wanted to blame somebody for it, and so he blamed you. He never guessed about Marvin Sand. He took out all his vinegar on you, Toby. He tried to get you the stiffest sentence he could, hoping that what happened to you would be a lesson to Alton. He thought it had. But when you came back, he was afraid it would start all over again. He didn't know it already had.

"That's why he hated you so much, son. He wanted to blame somebody for ruining his son and his daughter. But I think he knows that it was really nobody's fault but his own."

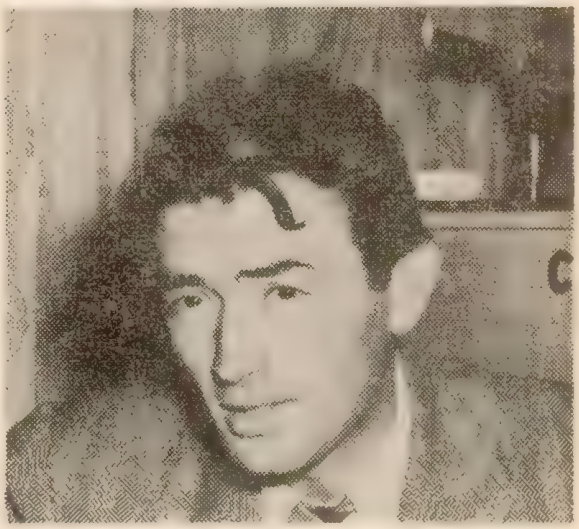
Soberly Cass studied the floor. "I reckon we're always fighting ourselves, never ready to accept our own responsibility."

"And that's where you're ahead, Toby. You can ride a straight road now and never have to look back," the sheriff said. He stood up then, placing his hand on Toby's shoulder. "You're tired, son. You ought to rest. Come on over to the house with us. We'll fix you a bed."

Toby nodded. "Just one thing first. I'd like to see Paul English, if he's conscious."

Cass said, "Yes, he's all right now. Funny thing, too. You might never have been cleared if Marvin hadn't gotten scared and tried to kill him. But he didn't need to do it. Paul never saw a thing that night we jumped the cow thieves. He never got a look at the man who shot him."

Together the three of them walked out of the courthouse and headed down the long, dusty street. Toby glanced down at Betty, and tightened his arm around her.



Will they fail at marriage?

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"It would be better for everyone if you'd go away," Julie said angrily

KILL IF YOU

WHAT WITH MALE cow rustlers and female heart rustlers,

Cattle Detective Ance Eastman ran into a peck of trouble

IT WAS a summer Saturday afternoon in Tres Mesas. Five of the six horses standing hip-down in front of the Flying Horny Toad Saloon were anchored to the hitchrail. At one end of the rack a sharp-eared roan stood securely tied to the rail by both bridle reins and the tie rope of a cotton-cord hackamore.

There was nothing particularly noticeable about this, but Ance Eastman, riding up dusty and dry from a long, sun-beaten trail, did notice it, partly because it was cowboy habit to notice things, partly because the travel-ganted palomino he was riding had been so hard to teach to stand with only dropped reins.

Ance liked horses—and men—you could count on to stand without hitching. He hadn't thought so much about how he liked women until right lately, but he reckoned they shouldn't have to be hackamored and tied fast, either. Less than a month ago, in another little cowtown two hundred miles away, Ance Eastman's interest in women had suffered a severe setback. Now he didn't even glance at the sunbonneted girl driving a battered buckboard down the dusty street.

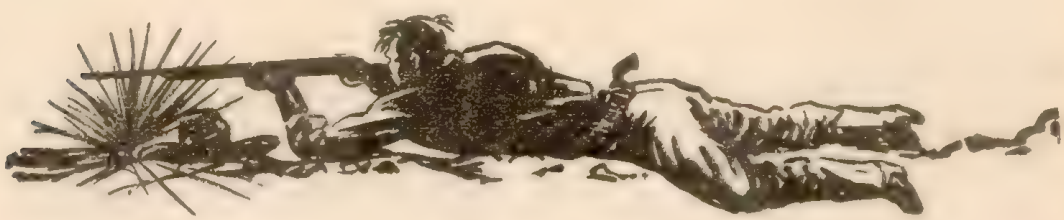
He unlimbered his leather-lean length from the saddle, dropped Orito's long reins, gave the horse's sweaty neck a pat, and went into the saloon, unhurriedly, as befitted a stranger with a sixgun at his thigh.

The Flying Horny Toad was a ten-by-thirty room in an old adobe, its mud plaster walls the dingy white of aging native *jaspe*, its low ceiling beamed with round, time-browned *vigas*. The bar itself was a thick adobe wall topped by a wide pine plank worn smooth by many a cowboy elbow and swipe of a bartender's rag. It's mirror was the glass of an old bedroom bureau, now furnishing scanty shelf room for bottles and glasses, but all shined up like a high-toned Kansas City barbershop. Over the mirror, mounted with a pair of bright bluejay wings seeming to sprout out of its warty shoulders, was an unusually large horned toad.

Four cowboys playing cards at the other end of the room looked up casually. Ance noticed that they all wore six-shooters. So did the two standing, their warp-brimmed hats pushed back, at the bar. For that time and place there was nothing unusual about any of it.

MUST

By S. OMAR BARKER



The one-eyed Mexican bartender's grin gleamed with three gold teeth. He reached for a whisky bottle and glass. Ance grinned back at him and shook his head.

"Beer, please," he said. "It's wetter when you've had a far ride."

The man drew him a foaming mug.

"You ride far? Too bad you don't have wings for fly, like my horny toad, eh?"

"Quite a critter, ain't he?" Ance could see that the bartender wanted his novel monstrosity admired. "First one I ever saw with blue wings. Most of 'em wear pink with green stripes."

The bartender chuckled. The tall, curly-blond cowboy a few feet down the bar cracked a faint grin.

"Stranger?" he asked. His voice had a soft, almost musical drawl to it, but somehow it didn't sound completely friendly. That was all right with Ance. He took a throat-cooling swallow before answering.

"Sort of," he nodded agreeably. "Where I ain't, they call me Ance Eastman."

"Could even be your name, huh?" The blond buckaroo winked knowingly. "Around here they call me Pike Haydon, and this man-child is Bob Travis. Two jolly Joes from the Diamond O's. Finish that gurgle gut, Ance, and I'll buy you a man's drink."

Ance recognized the implied gig, but didn't let it gouge him. A man could wear himself out challenging insults inspired by a combination of youthful roosterishness and bottle bravado.

"Maybe I better stick with beer till I grow up," he said pleasantly. "Meantime—" he raised his voice so the cowboys at the card table could hear him—"I believe in labeling my merchandise. I'm here as a stock detective, representing the Territorial Cattleman's Association. If any of you boys happen to be stealin' a few calves in your spare time, now's the time to raise your hand so I won't have to rub myself thin trying to catch you at it."

It was the first time any cowboy there present had ever heard a professional rustler-hunter come right out and declare himself. Usually they slipped in in the guise of broke cowpunchers hunting work. Surprised silence held on for a full minute. Then the dark, boyish puncher named Bob Travis stepped around Pike Haydon, something like a sneer of contempt on his round, good-looking face.

"If you're joking, Eastman," he said, "okay. But if you ain't, you better get this straight: whenever we need a snooper on Diamond O range, we'll send for one!"

"Somebody did," said Ance quietly. "Else I wouldn't be here."

"You tell me who, and I'll cut the so-and-so's throat!"

"Forget it, Bob," broke in the big blond with his velvety drawl. "Can't you recognize a fourflusher when you see one? Let's have a drink!"

Deliberately, both cowboys turned their backs. Again Ance recognized the implied insult, but again he chose to ignore it.

WHETHER announcing himself thus openly would turn out to be good tactics or not, he didn't know. All he really hoped was that there would be enough excitement in this job to help him forget a certain girl back in Seven Rivers who had decided she was too fine-haired to marry a man whose duty, as he saw it, had obliged him to shoot a cattle rustler.

Now he finished his beer, paid for it and went outside. Orito stood hipshot exactly where he had left him.

A sign that said Betty's Beanery was only two doors away. Ance left the horse where he was and started toward it. Thirty yards or so up the street a girl in a bright flowered calico and sunbonnet to match seemed to be having a little trouble driving her buckboard team up to the hitchrail in front of a general store. Somebody's discarded newspaper was flapping in the breeze against one of the hitchrail posts, and the matched grays were acting spooky about it.

Without hurrying much, Ance walked on up the street to help her. He wadded the newspaper inside his shirt, took the near gray by the bridle, led the team up to the rack and tied their snap hitches to the rail. It was a casual favor that any cowboy would have done for any woman. Ance started back to the restaurant with hardly a glance at the girl until she spoke.

"Gee—thank you!" she said.

Just three words, quietly spoken, but in them a music that reminded him of the sweet-toned fluting of blackbirds at the greening time of spring, a vibrantly feminine something that galloped his pulse and made him turn to look at her. The look didn't quiet his freshened pulse a bit. Wisps of hair he could see under her slightly pushed back sunbonnet were dark brown, just right to match warm brown eyes now regarding him with some curiosity above the friendly smile on rather wide, soft lips. It struck Ance all in a wallop how different this girl looked from the thin-faced, blonde professor's daughter he had been about to marry back in Seven Rivers.

"These grays aren't usually bronky," she explained. "Only I haven't driven them much. My brother usually—"

Ance found himself standing by the wheel with a hand reached out to help her out of the buckboard. That was more than the kind of casual favor that a passing cowboy would have ventured to offer a strange girl, and he knew it. But it gave him a warm feeling when she gave him her hand and let him help her down, though from the lithe, easy movement of her womanly body, he knew she didn't need the aid. She stood a moment, looking up at him gravely, a soft pulse-throb visible at the open neck of her dress.

"Thank you again," she said. "You're a stranger here, aren't you?"

"Yes, ma'am." Ance's high-boned face felt red under its leather tan, and looked it, too. "But you sure don't make me feel like one! I don't aim to be rude, but—"

"Look!" the girl broke in suddenly. "That's your horse, isn't it?"

Ance looked. Back down the street, the big blond buckaroo named Pike Haydon had hold of Orito's reins and was jerking the horse around considerably.

Ance got there quick, but Haydon had already dropped the frightened palomino's reins and was calmly starting to untie his roan horse from the hitchrail. Bob Travis was standing by his gray horse fiddling with a stirrup leather.

"Haydon," said Ance, his voice quiet with cold anger, "I'd like to know what call you've got to jerk my horse around!"

"I can tell you that easy, Mr. Pinkerton," said the big cowboy, with slow, deliberate insolence. "Any time a loose nag starts fightin' mine when he's tied, I'll give him a lesson! You want to make something of it?"

Ance was aware of Bob Travis's seemingly casual movement away from his horse to a position a few yards to one side and a little behind him. He knew Orito too well to believe he had been fighting Haydon's horse; and he had been a range officer too long not to recognize this play to bait him into a fight, with double odds against him.

As an officer, he knew better than to rise to the bait; but as a cowboy who has just seen his horse needlessly abused, he was white with anger. With an effort he kept his hand away from his gun, but that was the best he could do. His right hand lashed out and slapped Pike Haydon, open palmed, hard across the mouth. Haydon backed away a couple of steps.

"That's to learn you," said Ance, "to keep your hands off other people's horses!"

He saw Haydon's big red hand unmistakably tensing for a draw, as wrath contorted his face.

"You better be fast with a gun, Eastman, or I'm goin' to kill you!"

A SICK FEELING at the pit of his stomach, Ance realized what a spot he was in. Not only did young Bob Travis have him flanked, but off a few yards directly behind Pike Haydon stood his own palomino horse, in exactly the right position to get hit by any bullet of his that might miss Haydon. For a tenth of a second he wondered whether Haydon might be man enough to agree to shift the fight some place away from the horses if he spoke up about it. Before he could decide whether to try it or not, the girl in the sunbonnet ran in between them. She stopped with her back to Ance, her sunbonnet hanging by its chin string at the back of her neck, her brown hair glinting in the sun, her slim, round body visibly quivering.

"Pike Haydon!" she demanded. "What the dickens is going on here?"

"You'd better keep out of this, honey!" Haydon's drawl had that same smooth, almost musical sound to it that Ance had noticed in the saloon. "This is man business!"

"You're damn right, sis!" Bob Travis grabbed her by the arm. "This damn gully-snooper picked a fight with Pike, and by golly—"

"You don't have to lie about it, Bob!" The girl slapped his hand from her arm. "I saw what happened, and I'm ashamed of you both! Now get on your horses right this minute, and get on back to the ranch—both of you!"

"Why sure, Julie, honey," agreed Pike Haydon soothingly, "if you say so. If this bogus stock detective wants to hide behind a woman's skirts, it's all right with me—this time. I don't get slapped very often, but if he aims to hang around this country a while, maybe I'll give him a chance to try it again!"

"Aw, hell, Pike!" protested the girl's brother. "You ain't goin' to let her—"

At that moment the roan horse double-tied to the hitchrail suddenly decided he'd stood all this fadoodling around that he aimed to. With a windy snort he set back hard on rope and bridle reins, fighting his head, then lunged forward again, rearing and pawing the air. Julie Travis stepped out of reach of his flailing hoofs barely in time, and then only because Ance pulled her away.

Ance stepped up quickly, cut the roan's tie-rope with his knife, and with well accustomed fingers worked the bridle reins loose from the rail. By now the rest of the horses, excited by the ruckus, were lunging around. The four cowboys who came hurrying out of the saloon took care of that. Given slack, the roan quieted quickly. Ance handed his reins to Pike Haydon.

"Learnin' a horse to ground-hitch sometimes saves a man trouble," he said.

Haydon shrugged. "I'll owe you for cuttin' my rope, too, Eastman. And I advise you to keep away from my girl!"

Ance started to answer that, then decided not to. More of this kind of ruckus certainly wasn't going to help him get the job done that he had been sent to do. Besides, he told himself not very convincingly, whose girl this Julie Travis might be was certainly none of his business.

He went and picked up Orito's reins, quieting the palomino with a pat on the neck and a casual straightening of his mane, while he watched the men and horses at the hitchrail get themselves sorted out. He saw Pike Haydon walk over to where the girl was lecturing her brother, reach his arm around her shoulders, say something briefly to her, then step across his roan horse and ride away, followed in a moment by Bob Travis and two of the other cowboys. He couldn't decide for sure whether the girl had seemed to pull away from the big blond cowboy's arm or not—and what did it matter to him if she hadn't?

JUST WHAT he could say to such a girl for stepping between him and the threat of a bullet, he didn't know, but he felt he had to say something. Apparently Julie Travis must have had something like the same feeling, for she waited for him at the hitchrail after the others had ridden away.

"I'm sorry this ruckus come up, Miss Travis," he said soberly.

"You should be!" The girl's full lips were tight now. "Of course Pike didn't have any business jerking your horse around, but you didn't have to go and make a gunfight of it, either!"

"I get mad," shrugged Ance, "when anybody misuses my horse, the same as I would if he mistreated my woman—if I had one. But your bein' Haydon's gal, I can savvy your standing up for him."

"That has nothing whatever to do with it!" Julie spoke hotly, her pretty chin not far from quivering. "But I don't like trouble! It would be better for everybody if you'd just go on away. If there's any stealing on Diamond O range, we—we can take care of it ourselves!"

"Then it wasn't you that tipped the Cattle Association off to send a man?"

"It certainly wasn't! Now please go!"

If I hadn't seen your face, your eyes, Ance felt like saying, maybe I could persuade myself to do it. What he did say, rather stiffly, was: "I'm paid to ride wherever they send me, ma'am. I hope my duties won't cause you nor anybody you set store by any trouble."

He watched her hurry back up the walk to the store where her team was hitched. He had thought he would never have eyes for any woman's face or shapeliness again, but already this one had him bothered.

As he dropped Orito's reins in front of Betsy's Beanery, two of the cowhands who had been in the saloon but who had apparently only ridden around the block instead of leaving town, rode up alongside. The gray-mustached one spoke to him.

"My name's Lem Hoffstetter, stranger," he said. "Any time you feel yourself chokin' down, stop by for coffee. We stir it with a brandin' iron on the Lazy B Z."

Before Ance could answer, the two cowhands spurred up and loped out of town in a different direction from the way the Diamond O hands had gone.

Ance stood looking after them for a moment, and then went inside.

The waitress was a buxom, breezy blonde with an odd mixture of kindness and wary self-reliance in the look of her clear blue eyes. Ance had thought he could never like the looks of another blonde as long as he lived, but he couldn't help liking hers. She took his order for ham and eggs with a friendly smile, served it the same way, then sat down across the table from him.

"Sa-a-ay!" she said. "I knew it would happen some time! Do you reckon you're him,"

Ance looked puzzled.

"My dream man, I mean!" she sighed. "Tall, dark and handsome!"

"If I'm either dark *or* handsome," said Anse, matching her bantering smile with a slightly uneasy grin, "noon is midnight and the stars shine by day!"

"Yeah," the blonde girl sighed, but there was a twinkle in her eyes, "that's the way love works on a person, ain't it? More coffee?"

She poured it for him, then sat down again, looking serious.

"You're a stranger—but I took one look and I liked you." She shrugged. "Two looks and maybe I'll fall in love with you. That's the way us fool gals are, mister. Except—" this time her sigh didn't sound pretended—"except when we've already got an ache for some other no-account hairpin that needs his head examined! You happen to know a cowhand named Lem Hoffstetter?"

Ance tried not to show his embarrass-

Born Thataway

By LIMERICK LUKE

A buckaroo named Baldy Bill
Got married, as cowpunchers will.
He still has no hair,
But he's got a young heir
Who's balder than even ol' Bill.

ment at the girl's oddly personal chatter. She certainly didn't look crazy, and there was an honest sweetness about her expression that didn't tally with his idea of a hussy.

"You mean you're in love with Lem Hoffstetter?" Ance didn't say whether he knew the man or not.

"Golly, no! Old Lem's just the one that—oh-oh!" She broke off suddenly. "Here comes little Betsy Murdock's hell-raisin' heartthrob now!"

EVIDENTLY Bob Travis hadn't ridden on back to the Diamond O, as his sister had told him to. He came in with his bristles up, and stood behind Betsy's chair.

"Looks to me like you're takin' a hell of a long time to eat, Eastman," he scowled.

"I chew slow," said Ance, maybe a little more mildly than if he hadn't been remembering whose brother the brash kid was. "What's hurting you, Bob?"

"It ain't what's hurtin' me," young Travis was plainly trying to sound tough. "It's what'll be hurtin' *you* if you don't keep away from my sister and my girl! I'm just warning you!"

Without giving Ance time to make any kind of a reply, he turned and strode out again, his batwing chaps flapping.

"To think," sighed Betsy, "that I had to go and fall in love with a rip-snorting rooster like that when there're strong, silent men like you still running loose!"

"It looks," said Ance wryly, "like maybe I'd better find me another place to eat when I'm in town!"

"There isn't any. Look, let's quit beating around the bush. This place and the saloon have got the same back yard, and sometimes when I'm out there I can hear the talk. What was the big idea of announcing yourself in there as a stock detective?"

Ance studied her face a moment before answering. "Have you got some personal interest in this business, Betsy?" he asked finally. "Or just a woman's curiosity?"

"All right," said the girl. "You look like a man that could keep his mouth shut if he wanted to. I'll tell you. For some time I've been afraid Bob Travis was getting mixed up in a rustling deal. I figured if there was an Association man around for a while to throw a good scare into him, maybe he'd get wise to himself and quit it. He's not bad, Ance—just foolish and full of fizz and running with bad company. If you could manage some way to cure him without—without having to shoot him or send him to the pen, I'd owe you forever. I—I love the guy, Ance."

"Betsy," said Ance quietly, "to the Association, one cowthief looks just like another. But catching one thief here, another there, maybe shooting one, sending another to the pen, hasn't put a stop to stealing. So now we're trying out another system for a while. Petty stealing—what you might call amateur rustling—usually stops when they know there's a gully-snooper for the Association around. If those that ain't amateurs keep it up, we'll probably catch 'em. If they try shifting their operations to a new range, they'll find an Association man on the job there, too. We're hoping they'll find it discouraging. Meantime we go right on catching as many as we can, and we play no favorites."

"I was afraid of that. It makes me wish I hadn't wrote that letter to the Association for Old Lem. But—I—I'd rather see Bob sent to the pen than get to be a regular cow thief, hunted all his life like a wolf. So would his sister—I think."

"I doubt it," said Ance dryly. "But maybe we ought to ask her. Here she comes, now."

Ance stood with his hat in his hand while the two girls greeted each other with a brief, friendly hug.

"I just thought I'd stop in for a cup of coffee before starting back to the ranch," said Julie Travis, ignoring the cowboy completely.

"Fine," smiled Betsy. "How's your pa feeling today?"

"Not a bit good. I wish I could get him to go to a hospital, but you know how stubborn men are—especially old cowboys."

"No worse than the young ones," laughed the waitress, pouring Julie her cof-

fee. "This is a nice sample right here. When I ask him if he thinks I'm pretty, he just sets there!"

"You are a very pretty girl, Betsy," said Ance, but it was the other girl he was looking at. He saw the softness of her cheeks redden a little.

Betsy made him a mocking little curtsy. "If I was as pretty as Julie I wouldn't have to be told about it," she said. "Julie, this is Ance Eastman. He claims he's a wild and woolly cow-thief hunter."

"We've met." Julie's brown eyes met his steadily, her chin a little high. "For the last time, I hope."

"Not," smiled Ance, his pulse pounding again, "if I have anything to say about it!"

He bowed ever so slightly, put on his dusty hat and went out.

THE MESA HOTEL was a boxcar-shaped old adobe with outside doors to all of its five rooms. The one Ance got was also shadowed by a big cottonwood. Some time after midnight that night he had a visitor. Ance held him at gunpoint until he found out who it was, then held low talk with him for ten minutes.

The next day he rode far back among the mesas and canyons on Diamond O range, seeing nobody, learning nothing but the lay of the land. When he ate supper that evening at Betsy's Beanery there were several cowboys present, and beyond a brief nod when she took his order, Betsy Murdock ignored him. Once he caught a questioning look in her eyes, and shook his head. In a country where, as often as not, even strangers swapped brief howdies, nobody spoke to him.

In the Flying Horny Toad, except the one-eyed bartender, he found himself pointedly ignored. But he had a feeling that surreptitious eyes were sizing him up whenever his back was turned. That was all right with Ance. Stock detectives were never very popular among cowboys. Dishonest ones resented them; even honest cowhands usually avoided them, not wanting to be suspected of informing on some fellow cowboy who may have mavericked a calf or two. Ance knew how it was.

But after nearly a week of fruitless riding alone, some of it by day, some by night, and of continuing to be ignored by everybody he saw in town, it began to gall him. Even Betsy Murdock no longer seemed to want to chat with him.

"What ails me?" he asked her one morning over his before sun-up pancakes. "You'd think I'd been skinning skunks!"

"Nobody ever knows for sure who an Association man is after, I reckon," she shrugged.

"Well, at least you know I'm not after you, don't you?"

"Do I?" Some of the old bantering sparkle came back in her eyes. "And even if I did, Bob Travis doesn't. I'd hate you to get shot for trying to steal Bob's girl, Ance!"

"You're a sweet gal, Betsy, but—"

"But you know of one that's sweeter? A man could get shot for that, too, Ance—like as not from behind a bush."

"Well, I sure ain't doing no good this way," said Ance. "If there's any stealing going on anywhere around here I'm sure not getting onto it very fast."

"That was the idea, wasn't it? To discourage 'em just by being here till they get out of the habit?"

"Yeah," admitted Ance, not very cheerfully, "maybe it was."

But failure to discover evidence of rustling was not all that bothered him. Now, for the first time in his life, he was finding riding all day alone unbearably lonesome. He reckoned he knew why. Up to now he had kept conscientiously away from the Diamond O headquarters, and he had not seen Pike Haydon, Bob Travis or his sister in town.

You don't fall in love with a gal just by seeing her once, nor her with you, he told himself, but he knew that on his part it wasn't that way.

SHORTLY after noon the next day, Ance rode up to where a sick old cowman sat in a wheel chair on the shaded *portal* of the Diamond O adobe ranch house. Apparently the old man had neither seen nor heard him ride up. Before he

could speak, the door opened and Julie Travis came hurrying out to him.

She frowned and put her fingers to her lips, motioning him to follow her. In the shade of a big cottonwood fifty yards from the house she stooped.

"Mr. Eastman, you ought not to have come here!" That was what she said, but something about the way her big brown eyes looked at him made it hard for Ance to believe she meant it.

"There's no use beating about the bush, Julie," he said quietly. "I had to come."

"You mustn't say things like that! Oh, gosh, I don't want—"

By that time Ance had stepped off his horse and taken her in his arms. Whether it was just surprise that made her let him hold her slim, warm body close against him, he could not be sure, but he did know that he found her lips soft and yielding for an all too brief moment before her arms pushed him away.

"No, Ance! No!" It was almost like a cry of distress. "If Bob and Pike find you here there'll be trouble—and Dad is too sick to stand it! Just the excitement would kill him! Besides, he thinks both of them are such fine men! He—he thinks I'm going to marry Pike!"

"What do *you* think, Julie?"

The girl stepped back. "I think you had better remember we are strangers, Mr. Eastman," she said. "Please go now—and—and don't come back! I don't want Dad even to know you've been here!"

Ance said quietly, "If it's like you say, I'll go—this time."

Ance couldn't be sure whether he was seen leaving or not. But the next day, riding up a canyon somewhere around the boundary of Diamond O and Lazy BZ range, he was shot at five times. Not exactly shot at, either; for even a poor shot hidden up on the rimrock could have hit him at least one out of five with a .30-30, if he had wanted to. Not many rustlers ever cared to risk murdering an Association man, but such warning shots were nothing unusual.

It took Ance an hour to find a way up onto the rim. For two hours he followed the horse tracks he found there, then lost them on a rocky ridge.

That night somebody left a .30-30 cartridge stuck through a crude paper heart in the doorway to his room. Crudely printed on the heart, in pencil, were the words: "You've got 3 days to clear out, snooper."

In a way Ance felt relieved; really dangerous men never bothered much with warnings.

Again, two days later, shots from a rimrock spattered a canyon wall over his head. This time Ance didn't even try to track the shooter. Instead he loped a wide circle to a spot where he could watch for any Diamond O riders coming in from that direction.

Near midafternoon all four Diamond O cowhands came driving in a little bunch of poor cows, evidently for the purpose of shifting them to better grass. But so far as he could make out, not a man among the four was carrying a rifle.

ANCE SPENT the rest of that afternoon scouting some distant canyons as possible hide-outs in which a rustler might hold sleepers or misbranded calves for later delivery to some other range. All he found was the ashes of a small fire such as a cowboy might use to brand a calf or two, but they were already weeks old.

That night he rode in late. Both Betsy's Beanery and the Flying Horny Toad were already closed, but Ance had a little cache of crackers and sardines in his room, so he didn't mind.

What he did mind was that he didn't seem to be getting anywhere. Maybe his presence was discouraging the calf stealing business more or less as planned, but somehow that didn't satisfy him. The plain truth was that he was used to action, and felt plumb useless without it. Not seeing Julie Travis again didn't satisfy him either, but since the day he had kissed her, he had stayed away from the Diamond O as she had asked him to. He wasn't getting anywhere there, either.

Maybe it was this sense of frustration that made him careless about watching the

shadows as he went to his room. As he turned at his door a singletree reached out from behind the nearby cottonwood and walloped him on the head hard enough to have crushed his skull if the blow had not been glancing. The wallop knocked him groggy, but not too groggy to make a swift dive for a couple of starting-to-run legs and yank a man down. Except for grunting, the man did not put up much of a struggle. Ance sat astraddle of his middle and struck a match. The frightened face of the one-eyed bartender stared up at him owlishly.

"*Ay, por dios!* I make beeg mistake!" he cried.

"You sure as hell did," said Ance. "Who's payin' you to club stock detectives over the head?"

"Oh, no, no, no! I joost did not reconnize you! Sometimes I see somebody sneakin' around, I think they gonna sneak in your room to kill you! This time I hide behind some tree and pop him on the head!"

"Nice of you," said Ance dryly. "How come you're so anxious to protect me?"

Even lying flat on his back, the bartender's shrug was expressive, and his voice sounded earnest: "Because I like you! Also I like Señorita Travis!"

Ance didn't ask him to explain what he meant by that.

"All right, amigo," he said. "You tell me who you think is fixin' to kill me, and I'll let you go."

"No, no señor!" Fear bugged out the bartender's single eye. "If I tell something, maybe they kill me, also! More better you go far away from here, señor!"

"Thanks for the advice," said Ance dryly, and let him up. "Now git! And next time carry a lantern so you can see who you're waylaying!"

"*Si, si!*" said the man, and took out at a high lope for his saloon.

SHORTLY after midnight Ance had another visitor. It was old Lem Hoffstetter of the Lazy BZ. He slipped in and out again hurriedly, but he brought information, without saying how or where he got it.

Ance had Orito saddled and ready to ride in the deep dark of two o'clock in the morning when he saw a light in Betsy's Beanery. He knew he had no business showing himself, but Tuerto's wallop had left him with a resounding headache. A cup of hot coffee would sure hit the spot—and he believed Betsy Murdock could be trusted. He reinanchored Orito in the shadow of a big cottonwood and slipped in the back way. Betsy was there alone, just pouring herself a cup of coffee. She didn't look surprised to see him.

"Betsy," said Ance, "what the devil are you doing up this time of night?"

"Why not, sweetheart?" she shrugged, making a smile for him. "I've got a customer, haven't I? Was it old Lem that sneaked in to see you a while ago?"

"Betsy, you know too much."

"I wish to God I didn't," said the girl soberly, a tortured look in her eyes. "Ance, if you have to shoot anybody, I wish—"

"I'll do my best, Betsy." Ance took a gulp of hot coffee. "Killing's not always the only cure. If anybody asks if you saw me this morning, you did—heading south."

"And makin' scared tracks, with your shirt tail out!" Betsy nodded her understanding. She caught his hand and squeezed it as he turned to go. "You're a good guy, Ance. I almost wish you were mine. I know you won't shoot him if you don't have to!"

Ance's course out of town was northwest, not south. Half an hour before sunup he lay close under a juniper above a little rim of rock far back in hills, and watched two cowboys drive four cows with big fat calves into the same hidden canyon pocket where he had found branding fire ashes. However he had gotten it, Lem Hoffstetter's tip had been correct.

The two cowboys got off their horses. The bigger one tied his tall roan horse with both rope and reins to a juniper branch. They gathered twigs and built a small fire. Ance was close enough to see them lay the end of a running iron on it. They squatted on their heels to roll smokes while the iron heated. Ance could hear voices, but not words. A couple of times they laughed.

Presently the smaller cowboy got on his horse and roped a calf. His companion flanked it down and hogtied it. They didn't seem to be in any hurry. Smoke was curling up from the iron the big cowboy held to the calf's side when Ance stepped out on them.

"You ride early, boys," he said quietly. "Let's see how high you can reach!"

WITH a practically unanimous oath, both rustlers went for their guns. Anse fired carefully. His first bullet hit the smaller cowboy in the right arm, knocking him loose from his gun and sending his shot wild. Ance dropped flat behind a rock he had already picked out for that purpose as bullets from the bigger cowboy's gun zizzed through the air where he had just stood.

"Better throw down the gun, Haydon," he called out. "Murdering an Association man is a tough rap!"

More bullets spanged against the rock. Ance counted them, then risked a peek. Young Bob Travis was on his horse, trying to work the lasso rope loose from his saddlehorn, evidently aiming to make a run for it. Spooked by the shooting, Pike Haydon's roan had broken off the juniper branch he was tied to and was getting to hell away from there, dragging the branch with him, with Pike Haydon yelling curses as he tried to catch him.

Ance stood up. "It's no use, Haydon!" he called out. "I've got you!"

The big cowboy stopped, whirled around, and began reloading his gun. Ance waited to make sure the rustler meant to shoot it out, then let him have it. Pike Haydon dropped in his tracks. Young Bob Travis suddenly got loose from his rope and whirled his horse to run. Ance still had time to put a bullet in him, but he didn't do it. The boy was already bullet-marked. If he didn't leave the country, he wouldn't be too hard to find. And Ance had made Betsy Murdock a promise.

Pike Haydon was still breathing when Ance got to him, but not much.

"You win, snooper," he gasped. "If my damn horse hadn't busted loose—"

Ance whirled suddenly at a new sound of hoofs. It was Bob Travis coming back, but he wasn't alone. A black-hatted girl on a gray horse rode beside him. It gave Ance's heart a twisting pang to see the white, tight-lipped grimness on Julie Travis's face, riding straight in the saddle, a sixgun held steadily on her own brother.

"I knew they were up to something when I heard them get their horses, Mr. Eastman," she said. "So I followed them. But it seems you got here first."

"I'm sorry, Julie," said Ance.

"I'm not! Pike deserved to get killed for all the trouble he's caused, making a thief out of my own brother, and—"

"Hold it, sis!" Bob Travis broke in miserably. "I picked my own trail, I reckon, and I'll take my medicine."

"It could be you won't have to go to the pen this time, Bob," said Ance gravely. "With a wife like Betsy Murdock to keep you straight—and maybe a brother-in-law around to help if needed—maybe the Association might agree to let the judge give you a suspended sentence. Now climb off and let's see about wrapping up that shot arm."

None of them said anything while Julie helped him bandage the wound. Ance couldn't help noticing that his hands were shaking even more so than the girl's—and he knew very well why. Certainly it was not because he was unaccustomed to blood.

When the job was done he turned, hesitated a brief instant, then took Julie Travis in his arms. She was crying now, but from the way she clung to him, he knew it was right. All right for him, and for her. Maybe all right now for all of them.

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Rangeland Voices

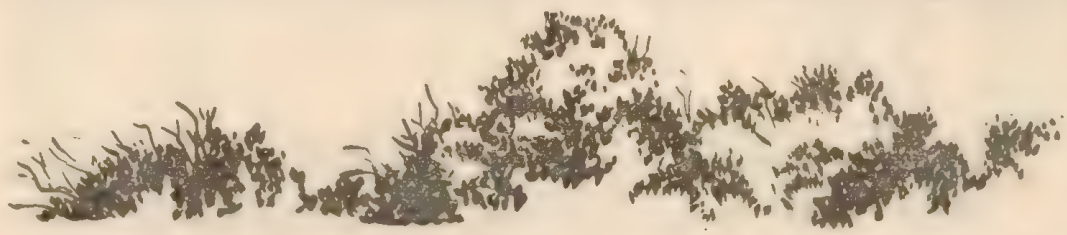
By S. OMAR BARKER

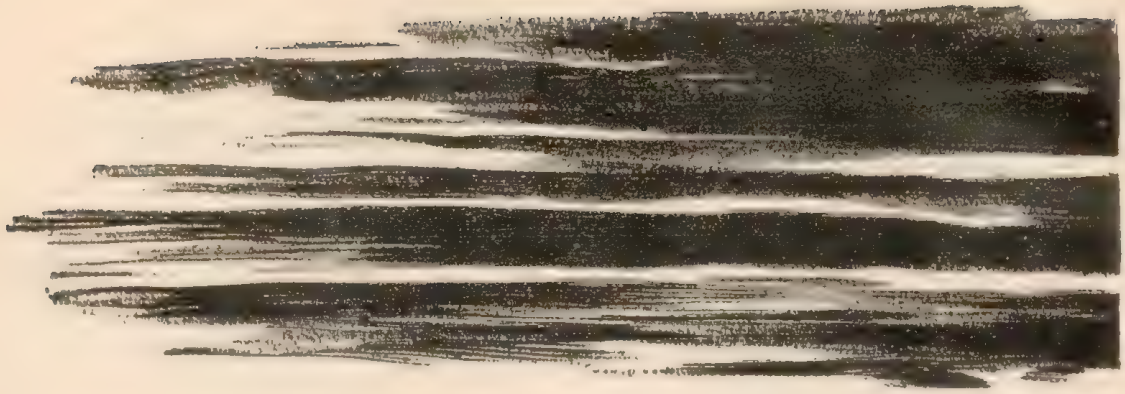
A blue quail's call from a rocky knoll,
A friendly sound, fluted and clear,
The *cr-r-r-RRUMP* of a frog at a waterhole,
Fall sweet on the cowboy's ear.

The cactus wren's solo, a meadowlark's trill,
The soft thud of hoofs as you ride,
The sun-downing cry of a lone whippoorwill,
Get under a cowpuncher's hide.

A prairie dog's whistle, a coyote's howl,
The cricket-throng's pulsating *whirr*,
And even the hoot of a moon-struck owl
Are cow-country voices that stir

A feeling deep in a cowboy's heart,
No matter how times may change,
That binds him fast to a world apart,
The world of the Western range!





FORBIDDEN

JULIUS CAESAR MORTON found a different, dangerous way to show a lot of people the value of a bobwire fence

TOOLING his newly acquired freight wagon into the outskirts of Trailfork for the first time, JC Morton—the initials stood for Julius Caesar—felt every bit as regal and all-conquering as his Roman namesake. The scarred old Conestoga might have been a gilded chariot, drawn by glossy silver Percherons instead of a nondescript six-mule team. To judge by the glow on JC's face, the freight he was hauling could have been incense and myrrh.

Passing Dutch Kinddahl's blacksmith shop, JC was aware that the clang of hammer on anvil had ceased. Dutch, a mountain of a man encased in a

FREIGHT

by WALKER A. TOMPKINS

disreputable bullhide apron, had emerged from the archway of his shop to stare open-jawed at JC's equippage.

"Playin' hooky from Grote's stable?" greeted the blacksmith.

"Nope. In business for myself, Dutch. Freighting business."

JC hauled back on the ribbons, but not quite before the sorry-looking mules had halted of their own accord. They had made the fifty-odd miles from Topaz Junction in a little better than a day and a half, which by the standards of the big Yucca Valley Stage & Freight Line outfits was half a day from being a speed record.

Dutch Kinddahl tossed a pair of smoking tongs into his cooling vat and ambled out to size up JC's rig at closer range.

"Hard of hearin', JC," Dutch groused. "Thought you said you had gone in business for yourself. What's come over Cy Grote? What vet'inary cemetery did he resurrect them longears out of? What junkyard did Cy steal that broke-down mudwagon from?"

JC Morton grinned smugly. He was a redhead, with freckles spattered like tobacco flakes over a ruddy, good-natured face. Hunched up on the wagon seat, he didn't look his six feet four. The soda and alkali dust of the desert crossing had silvered his brows and stubbled jaw, making him look twice his twenty-one years—all of them spent in Trailfork, all but two as a range orphan.

"This outfit belongs to me, Dutch—or will, in six more payments. You're the first man to lay eyes on the new Morton Freight Line Company, Unincorporated."

Flabbergasted, Dutch Kinddahl pulled a hairy forearm across a face heated crimson by the coke forge.

"Aw, don't rib me, kid!" the blacksmith drawled. "Week ago you were swampin' out Cy Grote's livery barn for ten bucks a week an' a bunk in the hayloft. Where would you get the wherewithal to set up in the freight trade?"

JC shrugged. "Picked up this Conestoga for nothing, for hauling it out of Ferguson's junk yard in Topaz. Fixed it up. I—"

"From the looks of it," Dutch jeered, "you didn't get a bargain, even at that price. How about them mules? That nigh swing-spanner looks like he fought with Washington at Valley Forge."

JC refused to be insulted. "Paid twenty bucks down for 'em, at the Topaz livery. Rejects from the remount officer at Fort Lang. I got six months to fork over eighty more pesos."

Dutch Kinddahl, whose dour mein hadn't been cracked by a smile in thirty-odd years, broke that record now.

"How come this sudden burst of ambition, JC?"

For the first time, Morton looked slightly flustered.

"Well . . . it's love. Old Man Drake says I can't marry any girl of his until I'm in business for myself and can prove I can support a wife. Says he won't allow no gal of his to commit matrimony with a stable hand. Don't blame him. Susie deserves better."

Dutch Kinddahl sighed, remembering his own lost youth.

"Offhand," he remarked, "I would say that Susie is going to die an old maid. Valley Freight has sewed up all the business in this corner of the Territory. Held their monopoly before you were born."

JC picked up his lines and dug a fistful of pebbles from the cigar box on the gunny-sack-cushioned seat beside him, persuaders for the antique mules.

"Thought of that before I decided to go into the freighting business," the ex-stable boy said loftily. "Already got myself a contract to carry me for at least a year."

The blacksmith gaped again. "Are you joshin' me, kid?" he blurted. "Any time Valley Freight overlooks any business, it ain't worth biddin' on."

MORTON removed his flop-brimmed stetson and batted dust from it. In his butternut jumper, bibless levis and rundown cowboots, he had to admit that he didn't look a conquering hero making a grand entry into town this afternoon; but Susie wouldn't mind. Hers was the only opinion that counted.

"Valley Freight," JC confided, "overlooked the Farmers' Co-operative. They need seed wheat and harvesting machinery and such-like freighted in. I underbid Valley's rates by thirty percent. I got the business, down in black and white."

Kinddahl scoffed, real disappointment showing on his soot-smeared face for the first time.

"Kid, I thought for a minute you might have something. Thought true love might accomplish a miracle. Now I see your judgment is as bad as your outfit."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning that Yucca Valley is cow country, and them misbegotten grangers who've homesteaded along the river won't even be here a year from now. You think a rancher like Matt Dorgan would stand by and let a nester put a plow to his sod?"

JC Morton's jaw thrust out belligerently. "Ain't Dorgan's sod, that strip between the river an' the foothills. It's government land, and you know it. Those nesters are proving up on their land legal."

Dutch Kinddahl shook his head hopelessly, his gusty sigh indicating that he was washing his hands of the whole business.

"Kid," the blacksmith said gently, "Dorgan knows a dozen farmers won't be a threat to his open range. Bar D Bar has grazed cows on that river-bottom strip since your pappy was knee-high to a Winchester. But Matt knows if them Co-op hayshakers get a toehold, more will follow. He'll find ways and means of driving 'em out before winter."

JC Morton felt a little shiver of apprehension coast down his backbone. He hadn't been born and raised in this valley not to know the grip the big cattle interests held on the open range. It was an old story, cattlemen versus nesters, and in other parts of the Territory it was a story that had had its final chapter written in blood and violence—with the cowmen coming out on top. It might even turn out that way here.

"I got no time to worry about range wars brewing, Dutch," JC said, but his voice lacked a little of its former ebullience. "I'm a freighting contractor. I aim to keep on freighting until a railroad builds over here from Topaz. That day won't come until farms take over the big cowspreads. That day's coming, Dutch. By the time it does, I'll have my pile made and me and Susie and our kids won't worry about a railroad putting us out of business."

Kinddahl waggled his head sorrowfully and returned to his blacksmithing. A few well flung stones and some verbal fireworks got JC's six-mule hitch under way again.

BY THE TIME he had reached Drake's Saddle & Harness Shop at the corner of Main & Postoak, JC's good spirits had returned. Even the sight of a row of Bar D Bar cowponies hitched at the rack in front of the Fashion Saloon across the street, indicating that Matt Dorgan's riders were in town for Saturday afternoon, failed to quench his feeling of well-being.

JC pulled up the mules in front of the false-fronted saddlery and wrapped the lines around the Conestoga's brake handle. He had been away from town ten days, the longest stretch he could remember, and this triumphant homecoming made him feel good.

Diagonally across the street corner from Drake's was the big red eyesore of Cy Grote's stable, where JC had been gainfully employed for the past three years as a hostler. It gave him a fine warm feeling inside, realizing that he had shoveled his last manure for old Cy. Now he was his own boss, a business man on his own, a full-fledged citizen of Trailfork.

One of Valley Stage & Freight's big tandem-hitched Studebaker outfits rumbled around the corner, chain traces rattling and sunlight glinting from the brass hame knobs of his competitors' spanking Percheron team. Ez Nystrom, a kid JC's same age and long a driver for Valley, was at the ribbons. Nystrom nodded as he passed JC's Conestoga, totally unaware that he was beholding a rival who was the first in a generation to crack Valley's airtight freighting monopoly. Ez was bound for Topaz, JC knew, to pick up the big shipment of assorted trade goods waiting at

the railway siding for the Emporium Mercantile here in town.

That kind of business, JC couldn't touch—yet. Valley Freight belonged to Matt Dorgan, and had all the freighting for Trailfork sewed up tighter than a catamount in a towsack. But the time would come when those contracts would expire, and Morton Freight would have a chance to bid for their business. Meanwhile the Farmers' Co-op, further down Strawberry River, would keep him hustling.

JC climbed down, his grand arrival somewhat obscured by the thick dust kicked up by Ez Nystrom's tandem, and headed up the warped plank steps of Drake's saddle shop. The door opened in his face to frame a girl in candy-stripe gingham, arms akimbo, a look of relief and annoyance on her face.

"Julius Caesar Morton!" Susie Drake greeted him. "Where on earth have you been gallivanting these past two weeks? All we knew was that you drew your time at Cy's livery and skedaddled—"

JC Morton bent his head for her kiss. Susie Drake was the prettiest thing that had ever happened around Trailfork. She had a cute, curved figure that would provoke a saint to forget his vows, topped off by the most dazzling head of honey-blonde hair anywhere in the valley. The fact that her heart belonged to JC Morton was a miracle which he accepted gladly, but could never help marveling about. Susie, in love with the town orphan. . . .

"Sugar plum," JC said, "I've been over to Topaz. Business deal. And it ain't been two weeks. Only ten days. Got a surprise for you. Sorry if you worried about me."

Susie's lower lip pouted. "I hadn't even missed you, to be truthful about it," she lied. "Oh, JC, what kind of business would take you to Topaz, on the other side of the world from me, without telling me what you were up to? I haven't slept a wink in two weeks."

"Ten days," JC corrected her. He turned to gesture at the dejected mules and the ramshackle, thirty-year-old mudwagon. "Honey," he said, "you're looking at the rolling stock and livestock of the new J.C. Morton Freight Lines, Unincorporated."

A querulous voice came from inside the saddle shop: "Either come in, or close the door. Don't stand there yapping for all the town to hear."

JC said, "Your father is his usual cheerful self. Lonesome for me, I reckon."

Susie squeezed his arm. "Dad was sure you'd run off with one of those painted jezebels from the Fashion. He was sure you'd gotten yourself in a jam and would be writing us to bail you out of Yuma Prison or something."

THEY WENT into the dimly lighted saddle shop, redolent with the sweet odors of neatsfoot oil and fresh leather and harness polish. Old Man Drake sat astraddle his cobbler's bench, waxing thread for a double-rigged swellfork pommel kack he was making for one of Bar D Bar's riders.

"Lost your job at the stable, I understand!" Old Man Drake commented waspishly. "Can't even curry a hoss right. Cy Grote is well shut of you."

JC grinned, and Susie grinned. Both knew her father's bark was worse than his bite. Drake's face was a skull fringed with Dundrearie sideburns and a jutting, square-cut brush of white chin whiskers. He was not the best prospect for a father-in-law, but he had his virtues. Cowmen came from all over the West to get Vance Drake to make custom-built saddles and bridles for them. On most things, Drake was easy-going in a cantankerous, dyspeptic way, but where his daughter was concerned, he was adamant. If she had to leave him via marriage, he had to okay the match.

"Pop," JC Morton grinned, "did you see that wagon an' team outside?"

Drake fished in his tool box for an awl. "Don't let 'em expire in front of *my* shop. Bury 'em down by the river. Just the sight of that contraption in front of my place of business will drive off trade."

JC said patiently, "Pop, I've signed up to haul every ounce of freight between the railroad and Strawberry River for the next two years. I'm in the freighting business."

Drake cast off his studied air of indifference.

"You're hauling freight for who?"

"Farmers' Co-op. First load is bobwire for fencing in their homesteads. Next week, plows and cultivating machinery. Next month, seed wheat, enough for four trips."

The immensity of her fiancé's enterprise dawned on Susie at last. She hugged him ecstatically.

"That means," she cried blissfully, "we can get married, doesn't it, Pop? You said as soon as JC proved he could support me—"

Drake shook his head. "The wedding," he said, "is off. I'm settin' my foot down, understand? JC is worse off than he was a week ago, barn-swampin' for Grote. He's gone loco."

JC's mouth firmed. Enough was enough. If Drake refused to take him seriously, if he went back on his word—By golly, he and Susie would take the bit in their teeth and elope—that was it. They'd have the minister over in Topaz marry them, and to hell with Pop.

"What do you mean, the wedding is off?" JC demanded. "I'm in business for myself, ain't I? I got my profits already lined up. Them sodbusters down the river have got cash to lay on the barrel head for my freight business. I cut Valley's rates—"

Drake shook his head.

"Won't work out. And I'm not referring to Valley Freight & Stage freezing you out."

"Why won't it work out, Pop?" Susie demanded angrily.

Drake pointed his awl toward the window.

"There's why JC won't be in the freight business this time tomorrow," he snapped.

JC Morton peered out the window. A burly man in bullhide chaps and a flat-brimmed stetson had clambered up on the bullbar at the end of the Conestoga, and was peering over the endgate at his freight.

Brushing past Susie, JC Morton jerked open the door and stalked out onto the saddlery porch. The man perched on the bullbar had loosened one corner of the wagon tarp and was cursing in a low, angry voice at what he saw.

"Matt Dorgan," JC called out testily, "I'll be obliged to know why you're snooping around my wagon."

DORGAN stepped to the ground, his fancy kangaroo boots—custom-built in Drake's shop for a hundred dollars the pair—spurting little snake heads of dust over the plank sidewalk.

"That's barbed wire you got in there, ain't it, Morton?"

The rancher's voice had an edge like a file. He was a towering man in his early forties, this Matt Dorgan, son of the legendary Longhorn Dorgan who had licked the Apaches back in the early '60's to found the vast Bar D Bar cattle empire. Around Trailfork, Matt Dorgan's word was law. He was a man who had never been crossed and who did not intend to be.

"Bobwire," Morton answered coldly. "Two tons of it, with ten kegs of steeples."

Dorgan hooked his thumbs in the massive tooled-leather shell belts which girdled his big midriff. His eyes held a reptilian glitter as they met JC's.

"Where in hell did you pick up that much barbed wire in this Territory, kid?"

"Over at the S.P. warehouse in Topaz."

Knots of muscle ground at the corners of Dorgan's jaws.

"Why'd you haul it over to Trailfork, in heaven's name?"

"For my customers, the ones who ordered it from back East. I'm in the freighting business, Mr. Dorgan." Here in Trailfork, you didn't refer to Matt Dorgan without the "Mister." The title, in this instance, was a slip of the tongue, a matter of habit.

Dorgan spat into the dust.

"In the freighting business, hey? Then you freight this damned bobwire back to Topaz, kid, and be quick about it. You ain't unloading it hereabouts."

Not trusting his temper, JC held his tongue. Dorgan asked suddenly, "Who'd you say ordered that wire, anyway?"

"Didn't say."

Dorgan spat again. "The grapevine has

already rumored it ahead of you, kid. That wire's for them hayshakers down at Tomahawk Ford."

Aware that Susie and her father were watching this scene from the window at his back, JC Morton braced his shoulders back and headed down the steps toward Dorgan.

"The rumors were right, Dorgan. The Farmers' Co-op is paying me to haul this freight in."

An ugly grin appeared under Matt Dorgan's close-cropped black mustache.

"Just how," asked the rancher, "do you figure to get your wagon down to them homesteads, kid? It's ten miles to the ford."

JC shrugged. "Why, I aim to cross the bridge west of town and take the River Road south. How else would a wagon get to the farms?"

Dorgan laughed. They had an audience now. Three big Bar D Bar punchers, headed by Dorgan's ramrod, Spud Malone, had sauntered out of the barber shop next door to witness the fun. Loafers from the Fashion Saloon, sensing trouble about to break, had drifted across the street.

"The River Road," Dorgan pointed out, "runs along the Bar D Bar graze. No barbwire wagon sets a wheel on my spread, ever."

JC Morton took a deep breath. He had been steeling himself for this showdown all the way from Topaz and now that it was here all he could think about were the two big staghorn butted Colts holstered at Dorgan's thighs.

"The River Road is a public thoroughfare, Dorgan. That ground west of the river ain't yours; it's leased graze from Uncle Sam. Nobody's putting a blockade across that road."

Dorgan turned away, gesturing to Malone and his other two Bar D Bar cowhands.

"Come on, boys," the rancher suggested casually. "Our drinks are getting flat." Dorgan caught sight of lanky old Buzz Brissard, the sheriff, standing with the others alongside Morton's wagon. Sight of Brissard's tin star planted a thought in Dorgan's head. He turned to call to JC Morton, who stood rigid and spread-legged in front of the saddle shop.

"Blockade the River Road? Of course I won't close the road to traffic, kid. No need to. You won't do anything as crazy as try to haul barbwire on the River Road. Will you?"

JC's cheeks flamed. "Dorgan," he called out huskily, "you can go to hell."

SOMEBODY laughed, a jeering laugh. Matt Dorgan and his punchers were already halfway across the street, dismissing JC from their minds.

In a cold sweat, forgetting that Susie and her father were waiting for him inside, JC turned away from the saddlery and headed toward his mules. They were too gaunted for the run down to the Co-op homesteads today; he would lay over Sunday and cross the river first thing Monday. Right now he had his team to attend to.

He was about to board the Conestoga when a hand touched his shoulder. JC wheeled to see Sheriff Brissard standing there, a ridiculously impotent figure in his tobacco-stained handlebar mustaches. For as long as JC could remember, Buzz Brissard had worn the star here in Yucca County; he wore Bar D Bar's collar for three terms of office, just as his predecessor had been a political flunky for old Longhorn Dorgan.

"Son," Brissard began in his squeaky, timid voice, "what was the trouble here?"

"No trouble at all, Sheriff."

Brissard poked the high-walled Conestoga with a thumb. "True you're freighting bobwire for the farmers downriver?"

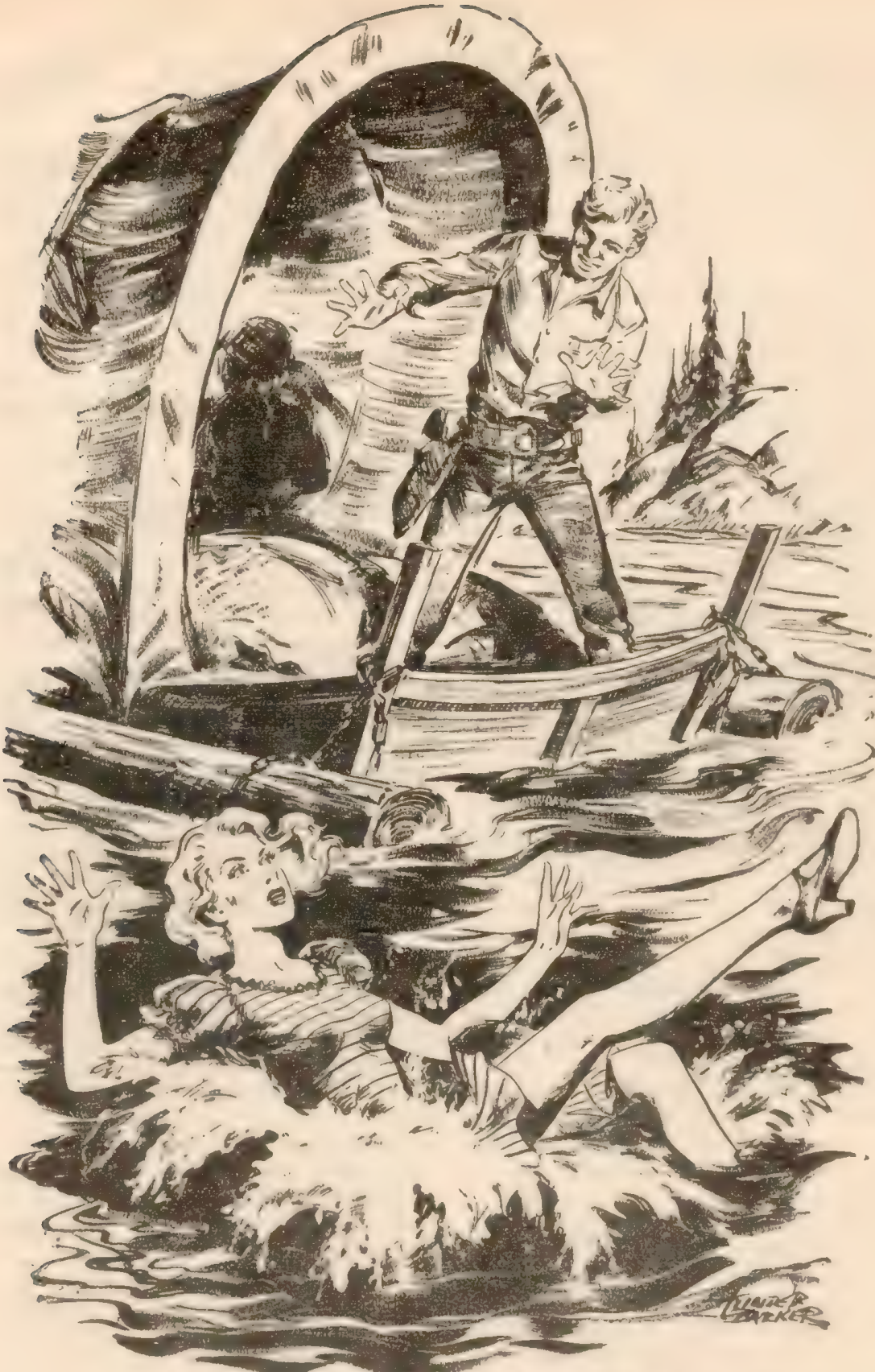
JC Morton nodded. "True. I'm in the freighting business, same as Valley."

Brissard's rheumy eyes couldn't meet JC's stare.

"Wouldn't advise it, son. You been around this country all your life. It's cow country. Cows and bobwire don't mix."

JC said, "That's exactly why the homesteaders are going to fence themselves in, to keep Dorgan's beef out of their grain.

The oversized Adam's apple in Brissard's throat bobbed up and down.



Susie hurtled overboard and landed in the river

"It's an unwritten law in open range country like ours that fences—ah, hell, JC—take an old man's advice. Mebbe you're in the freighting business like you say. But in this valley, bobwire is forbidden freight. Put it that way."

JC's eyes flashed. "Is it against the law to haul fencing wire anywhere I damn please?"

Brissard stroked his mustache nervously. "Not exactly against the law, no. But it runs contrary to cow-country tradition. I can't be responsible for what might happen if you cross the river with this wagon load of dynamite, JC."

JC Morton's neck was turning red. He said, "You're the sheriff, ain't you? If I run into trouble on the River Road hauling this load to its owners, you mean to say that ain't any concern of yours, sheriff?"

Brissard groaned. "Look, kid. In my job—"

JC shoved the star-toter aside and clambered up to his driver's seat.

"Let's get this straight, Brissard!" JC snapped. "You're a yellow politician sucking at Bar D Bar's bottle. You ain't got guts enough to fill a teaspoon. Why don't you tell me to obey Matt Dorgan's orders and haul this wire back to Topaz! Go ahead! Some of your voters would like you to declare yourself."

Buzz Brissard looked around uncomfortably, unaware that a small crowd had gathered to witness the argument. Old Man Drake was standing in his doorway, grinning. So was Susie, looking very proud and happy—and worried.

"You—you're in your rights, of course," Sheriff Brissard said lamely. "Go ahead, take your wagon across the river. But you'll be touching off a range war if you deliver that wire, son. You'll have that on your conscience."

JC grabbed up his lines with impatience. To hell with his original idea of camping over the weekend here in town. The mules could make it the ten miles to the first homestead before dark. He would stay tonight with Jeff Conroy, the president of the Farmers' Co-operative.

"Buttercup! Daisy! Pansy! Get along, you spavined Missouri canaries. *Hi-yupppp-hey!*"

THE MULES lunged into the collars and the big ramshackle Conestoga jolted forward, making Brissard jump aside to keep from being run down by a six-foot wheel. A little scatter of cheers sounded from the barflies and townspeople ranged along the front of the saddlery; the old-timers in that group were seeing a miracle. This was the first time in two generations that a finger of defiance had been lifted against Bar D Bar's tyranny here in Yucca Valley.

Over his shoulder, JC caught sight of a Bar D Bar puncher jumping off a bench over on the awninged porch of the Fashion Saloon and ducking out of sight through the batwings. The spy's report was probably unnecessary; JC had a hunch that Matt Dorgan was watching from the barroom window anyway.

The Conestoga was across the intersection of Postoak, the mules lined out toward the bridge at the west end of town which crossed Strawberry River, when JC became aware of someone running to overtake him, calling his name.

He hauled up, peering down through the sifting dust to see Susie. Before he could protest she had clambered up on the seat beside him, her face pale and strained.

"JC—please wait. Wait. You're going to be in town tonight, aren't you? I'll bake you a ginger cake—we'll have supper. Pop's thawed out, seeing you take a stand against Dorgan. We can talk it over at supper—"

She broke off, winded by her torrent of words.

"Nothing to talk over, Susie. I'm running this freight down to Jeff Conroy's farm before dark. I'll rest the mules at his place and be back in time for Sunday School in the morning."

Moisture glinted bright on Susie's lashes. "JC—I'm afraid. You heard what Matt Dorgan said. He won't let you use the River Road."

"I'm not afraid of Dorgan, honey."

"I know, I know you're not, JC. But—

isn't there some other way you could deliver that freight to the nesters?"

JC got an arm around the girl's waist and pulled her close. "How? The east bank between here and Tomahawk Ford has got a dozen gulches blocking it, even for a man on horseback. River Road's the only way a wagon can get down to the farms."

Susie buried her face in her hands. In a whimpering voice she whispered, "But Dorgan's father always hired guns to do his bidding. Matt wouldn't stop at murder to keep that wire from reaching the Co-op, you know that."

"Times have changed. This ain't Longhorn Dorgan's West, honey. Don't worry about a thing."

"But you could stay overnight—stay over Sunday. There's no rush."

JC gathered up his reins. "I'm sorry, honey. I got to play my cards my way, now that I'm in business for myself. If I let Dorgan bluff me this time, I'd be licked."

"You could store the wire in Dad's shed —let the farmers pick it up themselves."

JC shook his head. "They're paying me to freight that wire from the railroad to their barn doors, honey. You give me a kiss, and I'll have that ginger cake tomorrow evening."

They kissed, for all the town to see, and then Susie Drake climbed down.

"Tomorrow night, then," she smiled through her tears.

FIVE MINUTES LATER the big mud-wagon was rumbling over the plank bridge west of town. JC swung the mules south, picking up the River Road which flanked the Strawberry's canyon.

On his right hand, the open sage-dappled grazing range lifted off and away toward the horizon of the Thundergust Range. He needed a fresh team for the grade leading over the Bunchgrass Ridge, five miles down the road. Once over the hump he would have easy going, down into the fertile bottomlands where Jeff Conroy and eleven other hayshaker families had taken out preemption claims.

That far valley was too richly loamed to be cattle graze forever. A year from now it would be golden with grain; another five years and big elevators would show on the skyline, and the railroad would have a reason to build a spur over from the main line.

With the mules already beginning to feel the imperceptible lift of the grade, JC Morton planted his boots on the Conestoga dashboard and began to think about the rashness of his decision, pulling out of Trailfork with his explosive cargo, the makings of a range war, in full sight of Matt Dorgan.

He didn't have a gun on his hip, and he had left his Winchester back at Grote's liverystable. Well, hell, guns wouldn't help him any. If Dorgan intended to stop him here on the River Road, ambush would be the cattleman's way.

"I wind up drygulched along the road, I'm a hero," JC Morton grunted aloud. "Susie weeps bitter tears at my funeral. That half-pint sheriff goes around mumbling 'I told him so.' Hell, if I had any brains I'd turn around and head back to town."

He fished a handful of rocks from the cigar box and pelted the hides of the mules, who were showing signs of wanting to quit. He'd be lucky if he made it to the top of Bunchgrass Ridge before dark, let alone arriving at Conroy's in time to unload Jeff's share of spooled bobwire.

Two miles down the River Road, out of sight of town by now, Morton was forced to let the mules rest. Pretending to check the lashings of the tarp over his load, he had a long look at the road behind. No riders were following him.

Then he heard a shod hoof strike a rock, down in the river canyon at his left. JC's belly muscles tightened. A rider could easy enough take the opposite bank and ford the Strawberry anywhere along here, without being seen from the road.

The winded mules needed this breather badly.

JC climbed down off the wagon, got the grease bucket hanging under the jockey box, and began lubricating the axles. A man had to keep his rolling stock in good condition when he was in business for himself.

A RIDER on a big bay gelding broke clear of the cottonwood scrub on the river side of the road and spurred out abreast of the lead mules. JC, squinting under the wagon, saw that the gelding was dripping wet, proof that it had just swum the river. All JC could make of the rider as he dismounted were a pair of saddle-warped legs encased in Justin boots, and sunlight winking off the brass backstraps of sixguns belted to the rider's flanks.

Then a voice he recognized as Spud Malone's, the Bar D Bar foreman, rang loud and challenging above the wheezing of the lathered mules: "JC, come out where I can get a look at you."

JC's pulse was slugging in his ears. There was a rumor current in the valley that Matt Dorgan had hired Malone for his gun prowess more than his cow savvy.

Hanging up the grease bucket, JC wiped his palms on his pants and headed along the side of his mule team, meeting Spud Malone in front of the leaders. Malone was grinning malevolently, hands hooked in shell belts. He had a scarred face, battered in many a saloon brawl. His nose was twisted into a misshapen lump over forking yellow mustaches, and his grin exposed broken snags of teeth.

"So," grunted JC, "Matt sicked you onto me. Why can't your boss stomp his own snakes, Spud? No guts?"

Malone pretended injured innocence. "Me follow you this far from town, kid? Why—I got a dozen witnesses to prove I'm back at the Fashion, playing stud poker with the boys."

JC licked his lips, desperation in him. "You've had your pasear for nothing, Spud. You ain't stopping this wagon."

Slowly and deliberately, Spud Malone unbuckled his gunbelts and carried them over to his waiting horse, looping them over his saddlehorn. He made a big business of removing a bowie knife from its scabbard under one bootleg and putting the weapon in a cantlebag.

As JC Morton stared, fighting off a sick sensation in his stomach, he saw Bar D Bar's beefy foreman remove his stetson and hang it over the pommel. He watched Spud Malone roll up the sleeves of his Rob Roy shirt, exposing muscle-slabbed arms furred with short black hairs, curling and ugly.

"When I get through with you, you won't feel like getting this wagon turned around to town," the ramrod said. "Better attend to it now. I'll load you aboard and whop these jennie mules downgrade. They'll get you back to town all right."

JC Morton fought to keep the tremor out of his hands as he stripped off his jumper and fumbled at the buttons of his hickory shirt. He tossed the garments up on the Conestoga tongue, flexing his hands, the sunlight glinting on his muscled chest.

"If this is how you want it, come ahead," JC Morton said.

"This is how the boss wants it, kid," the foreman answered.

JC swallowed, breathing deep. "Come on, Spud. Earn your wages. You'll wish you'd stayed at that poker table."

Spud Malone spat on his palms again. "JC," he said tolerantly, "I feel like a school bully picking on a first grader, but orders is orders. It's your funeral."

The Bar D Bar foreman was through with talking. He came at the lanky redhead with a ham-sized fist cocked for a haymaker that would finish this thing quick and easy.

THE BLOW had a sledgehammer's force behind it, but Malone's target—the tip of JC Morton's chin—was not there when the fist arrived. Malone staggered, thrown off balance by the sheer violence of his punch, and before he could recover, something exploded in his right eye and opened up an ugly gash under the brow.

JC sidled around, not wanting to give his heavier opponent a chance to rush him back against the Conestoga. This brawl, if he were to win it, must depend on keeping away from Malone's murderous fists and boots and bear-hugs. He knew he had to keep chopping at him to wear him down, and he landed a grazing left behind the ramrod's ear as Malone whirled to locate his adversary, breathing gustily.

Malone lunged, but JC Morton was an elusive, darting shadow just out of range of the puncher's flailing knuckles. Blood was blinding Malone's damaged eye; the upper lid was beginning to swell, purple and heavy-feeling.

"Stand and fight like a man, blast you, kid!"

Morton caught a spent uppercut on the side of the head, recovered in time to avoid the ramrod's clutching hands and drove in a solid, smashing one-two to Malone's other eye.

Hell, he can be licked, Morton thought, a wild confidence welling up in him, and then a ton of bricks caught him on the nose and mouth and sent him cartwheeling a dozen steps before a bootheel caught in a rut and he landed on his back at the far side of the road. He tried to get up, but was paralyzed.

Spud Malone could have finished him off right then, if he had followed up his advantage; but the big puncher, thinking he had already achieved a knockout, took time to yank a bandanna from his hip pocket and wipe away the crimson curtain that had obscured his vision.

The sheriff's horse waded out

Struggling to his feet, JC Morton shook his head to clear it of fireworks. His brain seemed to be swelling, pushing at the inside of his skull; he was conscious of the salty taste of his own blood, and a loose tooth against his tongue.

He was vaguely aware of Spud Malone weaving toward him, head lowered, shoulders bunched, right and left fists feinting as the big man measured his youthful opponent for the payoff punch.

At the road's edge JC Morton took refuge in retreat, backing away in the direction of the mules. The ex-army longears were regarding the fight without interest, content to be standing in the traces.

Bawling an oath, Malone stooped to pick up a rock and hurled it at Morton. The kid dodged, but not in time; the stone rapped him hard on the shoulder and spun him around. He completed the turn, using it to add impetus to a looping haymaker which crashed through Spud Malone's guard and jolted the man's head back, ending his wild, headlong charge.

Numb and sick, fighting to keep his senses, JC saw the Bar D Bar foreman aiming a kick at his groin. He swiveled to take the foul on the side of his thigh, reaching down to grab Malone's lifted leg and haul it upward with all his strength.

Malone went down, yelling furiously, and yanked his leg free of the kid's grasp. He was coming to his feet when JC landed another blow to Malone's damaged right eye.

Malone was hurt, but he was in better shape than JC at the moment. Lunging forward, he drove the kid back, raining blows on his belly and chest. For a desperate moment JC felt the puncher's iron-clawed fingers grabbing at his throat, but he managed to tear loose. Backing away, he was unaware of his direction and thudded hard against a wagon wheel.

In a whirling black void, JC could only sidestep Malone's rush. But Malone was not after him. He was reaching for the short-handled shovel hanging from a bracket above the jockey box, between the Conestoga wheels.

MALONE was yanking at the shovel when JC stooped to seize the lard bucket full of axle grease. Swinging it around his head, Morton crashed

the bucket against the side of Malone's neck, sending great black gobs of grease flying.

The blow took Malone's attention away from the shovel. He backed off, reaching both arms for JC as he dimly saw the kid boring in, fist cocked. The fist connected with Malone's jaw, but it had no steam behind it. Outweighed, outreached, JC was nearing his finish. Malone hardly felt the blow.

But it did the trick. Off balance, Malone's body arched backwards. Falling, his head rapped with a thudding, meaty impact on the hub of the front wheel, laying open the scalp to reveal a crescent of white bone which quickly reddened over as Malone dropped inert into the dust, one arm under the wagon tire. His eyes were glazed, unseeing; he didn't get up.

Gasping for breath, standing at a half-crouch with arms dangling, JC Morton stared for several minutes at Spud's unmoving shape there by the front wheel, unable to realize that his weak punch to the jaw had, in reality, ended this thing. Spud Malone was out colder than a well-digger's feet.

Sick and spent, JC zigzagged his way to the back end of the Conestoga and unhooked his canvas water bag. He jerked out the cork and poured tepid water over his head, letting the runoff spill down his naked back and chest, washing tracks in the blood and dirt which streaked his flesh.

He felt as if he had made a one-way trip through a meat grinder. His knees were rubbery and it hurt to breathe. One more solid punch, he knew, and it would have been lights out.

Slogging back to where Spud Malone lay sprawled, JC felt no sense of elation. He hadn't won a battle, actually; or had he? Malone had the advantage of a hundred pounds of weight, the advantage of years of experience over JC. Malone had resorted to foul tactics first, using his boot, making a grab for that shovel.

Sucking air into his lungs, Morton rounded his mule team and lifted Malone's Colts from holsters. He jacked open the cylinders and removed the cartridges, throwing them into the thickets alongside the road. Malone would be in the mood for shooting when he rallied around.

There was a dripping wet canteen hanging from Malone's saddlehorn, proof that the ramrod had filled it down at the river. It felt cold to JC's touch. He swigged down a drink, squirted water around the loose tooth, waggled his jaw to make sure it wasn't broken in a dozen places. It felt like it.

With the canteen half empty, he walked back to where Spud was beginning to show signs of coming back to life. Upending the canteen, JC sloshed cold river water over the ramrod's head, washing the blood from his eyes and scalp wound.

"Your horse is waiting to take you back to that poker game you never even left, Spud!" were the first sounds that made any sense to Malone's buzzing ears. JC got his hands under the beefy segundo's armpits and Malone, grabbing a wagonspoke to help himself up, stood shakily on his two legs.

"What'd you hit me with?" Malone inquired dazedly, clapping a palm to his bleeding scalp. "Must of been a pole-ax."

JC Morton brandished a clubbed fist under Malone's nose.

"Never touched you with anything but what God give me to fight with, blast you. Get the hell out of here, Spud. Get back to Matt Dorgan, and tell him next time he tries to stop a Morton freight shipment to send his whole crew, loaded for bear."

SPUD MALONE stopped trying to figure out the mystery of his defeat and reeled his way back to the bay gelding. JC, watching warily over the backs of his wheelers, saw Malone climb awkwardly into stirrups, making no attempt to buckle on his guns. Belatedly JC saw a rifle stock he had overlooked.

"Kid," the Bar D Bar foreman spoke up, "you raked in the chips this round. You'll have that damned bobwire delivered to them hayshakers before my brains stop jumping. But don't do it. Use your brains, if you got any—turn this wagon around and head back to town."

JC Morton was too busy getting his

mules in motion to pay any attention to Malone's advice. He wished now he had thought to take the loads out of Malone's belt loops. By rights he should have run the bay off and made Malone hoof it back to town.

"See you at the funeral," Malone sang out, almost cheerfully, and reined his horse around to head back into the river canyon.

"Any funeral I see you at," Morton yelled, "you won't be in shape to see me on account of the coffin lid, Spud . . ."

Malone disappeared into the cottonwood scrub. It struck Morton as odd, Spud Malone choosing to go back the way he had come, swimming the Strawberry again. Then he realized that Spud was under orders not to be seen coming back into Trailfork. He would sneak into the Fashion poker room the back way, with nobody any the wiser.

JC's spirits lifted as he felt the mules throwing their weight into the collars. With this much steam under their skins they would make it over the ridge and down to Conroy's dry farm before dark, after all.

The Conestoga had covered fifty yards from the scene of the fight when the single gunshot broke the late-afternoon hush. The flatted, barking crack of a saddlegun, not a six-shooter—that Winchester Malone carried in a saddle scabbard.

The shot came from somewhere behind and down in the canyon. JC was wondering about it when the team suddenly halted. When JC looked around, it was to see his nigh swing-span mule down in the harness.

Struck by a sense of disaster, JC scrambled down off the wagon. Examining the mule, at first he could not believe the jack was dead. Then he discovered the little round hole in the neck where a .30-30 bullet had smashed the spine, just below the cropped mane.

JC Morton was too whipped to vent his outrage in profanity. He stood numb, looking at the dead mule, remembering the stories he had heard about Spud Malone's prowess with a long gun.

Well, Malone had stopped the wagon. It would be impossible to make the grade ahead with five mules. Sick at heart, JC returned to the wagon, opened the jockey box and got out a knife to cut the mule's carcass out of harness.

Malone had accomplished what Dorgan had sent him out to do. He had prevented the bobwire from reaching the Co-op farmers, at least temporarily.

MORTON considered unhitching and driving the team back to town, then bracing Cy Grote for the loan of a ten-horse hitch to haul the Conestoga on to its destination, even if it took him till daylight.

But that wouldn't work. It would mean leaving the wagon stranded here on the road until at least midnight, and by that time Bar D Bar could set fire to the whole shebang, or roll it down into the canyon where the wire would be lost beyond recovery in the river deeps.

JC considered the grade behind him. Downhill all the way to the Trailfork bridge . . . five mules wouldn't have any trouble making the return trip, if he could turn around on this narrow road.

It was getting on toward sundown when JC finished hauling the dead mule over to the canyon rim for the coyotes to devour, using the lead pair for the job. He reharnessed, substituting a leader for the dead animal, and then, not getting into the wagon, goaded the team around and managed to head the Conestoga back toward town without capsizing it in the narrow road.

Not until he was back on the box, heading north on the downgrade through the purpling dusk, did he become fully aware of how much punishment he had absorbed from Malone's fists. His head and jaw and teeth still ached and he knew he had at least one cracked rib, high up where the rock had struck him. Malone had aimed for his head; that rock could have pulped his skull like a rotten melon rind.

The whole town would know of his return, when he hit the bridge. That was galling to contemplate. The worst of it was, it would be useless to report the slaughter of his mule and the attack he had

suffered. The sheriff would demand more than his word for it that Matt Dorgan's foreman had been responsible for stopping the shipment. And as Spud had bragged, he would have plenty of witnesses to prove he had never budged from the Fashion Saloon.

JC thought of Susie, worrying her heart out wondering where he was, and how glad she would be to see him back tonight, covered with bruises though he was. But the lift that thought gave him didn't last long.

He still had to get the wagon down ten miles of the River Road, tomorrow or the next day. By then Dorgan would have his ambushers planted to pick off another mule — or maybe the driver would be their target.

The only thing JC Morton knew for certain, as he swung the dejected mules east onto the Strawberry bridge with Main Street's lights beginning to bloom through the twilight, was that his cargo of forbidden freight was still in his possession. He would deliver it to his consignees down on the Co-op bottoms—come hell or high water or all the ambush lead Bar D Bar could throw at him.

MORTON downed his third wedge of ginger cake and shoved his chair back from the table, watching the cone of lamplight play tricks with Susie's braided coronet.

He felt better for a bath and a shave and a change of clothes, and Doc Felby had taped his cracked rib, summoned to the Drake cottage by old Vance. The mules were stabled in the saddlemaker's private shed out back, the Conestoga with its barbed wire cargo safe in Drake's back yard.

"Spud might have killed you," Susie said, worshiping the redhead with her eyes. "You're lucky Matt Dorgan didn't go after you himself, JC."

The kid rolled himself a smoke, glad for the opportunity to let the tension ease from his bruised muscles. He wondered why Old Man Drake hadn't tarried to eat supper with them; he had gone out with the doctor, mad as a setting hen. Whether his rage was for JC's mixup, or indignation for what Bar D Bar had done to his future son-in-law, JC wasn't sure.

"Water over the dam, sugar pie," Morton said, licking a brown-paper cigarette and lighting it over the lamp chimney. "Job facing me is how to get that bobwire down to the Co-op without tangling with Dorgan's bunch again."

Susie Drake gathered up the dishes and carried them into the kitchen. The street door banged open behind Morton and he jerked around, every nerve on edge. Then he relaxed, recognizing Susie's father. Jeff Conroy was with him, a gaunt-faced clodhopper in granger's high-bibbed levis and a frayed straw hat.

"JC," the president of the Farmers' Cooperative Association blurted, "how much do we owe you for hauling our wire over from Topaz?"

Morton drew hard on his smoke. "My rates were ten bucks a ton—thirty percent under Valley Freight's. We hashed all that out in writing, didn't we, Mr. Conroy?"

The farmer hauled a long chamois purse from a hip pocket, loosened the strings and shook a stack of gold coins into the cup of his hand.

"Figured out to two ton even, son?"

Morton stood up frowning. "Hauling charges ain't due until the freight's delivered, Mr. Conroy. Would of been unloaded by now, but I run into a little delay on the River Road this afternoon."

Jeff Conroy held out two twenty-dollar coins.

"That's just it. Heard all about it from Drake here, about Dorgan sending that plug-ugly of his out to waylay you. We're paying off now, here in town. Getting the wire out to our homesteads ain't your responsibility—or ours."

There was a note of defeat in the Co-op boss's voice which struck a chill in JC. What did the offer of double payment signify?

"Wait a minute, Jeff. I ain't earned my money yet. I won't take it—not until the wire's unloaded at your door. That was the deal. I ain't welshing on it."

Conroy and old Drake exchanged glances.

"Look, JC," Susie's father said gently. "Conroy ramrods the Farmers' Association. Whatever decision he makes, his neighbors will back up. Take your pay. Monday morning, you're shipping that wire back to the railroad."

JC was aware that Susie was at his side, linking her arm through his. JC said in a whisper, "You mean you're letting Matt Dorgan buffalo you, Mr. Conroy? You can't plant wheat and expect to harvest it without fencing your land against Bar D Bar cows."

Jeff Conroy shook his head somberly.

"I happen to be in town buying grub for the wife," the farmer said. "I'll be heading back home tonight. Tomorrow, I'll call a mass meeting of the Association, tell 'em we might as well call it quits and move elsewhere. What happened to you on the River Road is just kid's play compared to the range war Dorgan will throw at us if we buck him."

JC Morton loosened Susie's grip on his arm and stepped over to lay a hand on Conroy's shoulder.

"Look, Mr. Conroy. I'm going to get that bobwire to you by Monday night, at the latest. Don't ask me how. I don't know yet."

CONROY avoided the kid's gaze.

"Won't work," he said heavily. "Dorgan's too well entrenched; he commands too many guns. We were fools to think we could break the cattlemen's hold on this country. The wire's got to go back to the wholesaler in Santa Fe."

JC Morton seized the old sodbuster's hand.

"No. You're not quitting, Mr. Conroy. Look, my own parents were the first homesteaders down on Strawberry Ford, twenty-odd years ago. Dad got bushwhacked—nobody knows by whom, for sure. But Trailfork knows it was one of old Longhorn's gunnies. Mom died of a broken heart when I was only two years old—the year Longhorn died and Matt took over the Bar D Bar. Can't you see I'm in this fight, too? It goes deeper than just delivering a load of bobwire like I contracted to do."

JC's whole heart was in his plea. Something of his vitality and courage touched the beaten old man and brought a new fighting glint to his eyes. Conroy had spearheaded the invasion of homesteaders to Yucca Valley, a year before; he had organized the Farmers' Co-op to fight Dorgan tyranny.

"By hell, I'm ashamed of myself for running up the white flag tonight, kid," Conroy said huskily. "I'll hold that mass meeting, like I said—but it won't be a surrender meeting. We'll figure out some way to get our wire past Dorgan's gunhawks, kid. Pulling together, we'll do it."

When Conroy left, a knock sounded at the Drake door, and the saddlemaker answered it. Susie and JC heard her father snarl out an oath; and then the lamplight touched the two men standing out on the porch—Sheriff Brissard and Matt Dorgan.

JC crossed the room with reaching strides, seeing that Vance Drake was refusing to invite the visitors in. He brushed past Drake and opened the screen door, halting in front of the cattle king and his flunky with the star.

"Looking for me, gents?" Morton asked coldly.

Matt Dorgan gestured toward Drake, who remained in the house, glowering.

"Drake's spreading a lot of malicious gossip around town tonight that I don't like, JC," the Bar D Bar owner snapped. "Downright libel. I do not propose to tolerate it."

JC Morton shrugged. "Such as?" he prompted.

Dorgan glanced at the sheriff. Buzz Brissard cleared his throat, staring at his boots. "Drake told the medico you had to get patched up," the sheriff muttered, "after being assaulted by Dorgan's foreman out on the River Road."

Morton grinned. "Sheriff," he said, "have you had a good look at Spud Malone this evening?"

The sheriff nodded, glancing at Dorgan for moral support.

"I—questioned him in the back room at

the Fashion not an hour ago, JC. He denies—"

"Did Spud have a pair of black eyes, maybe?"

The sheriff gulped. "He had a brawl with the roulette croupier earlier in the evening. Boss bartender gave me a full report of that. Croupier admitted fighting with Malone."

Matt Dorgan snapped triumphantly, "My foreman has not set foot outside the Fashion since you left town with your wagon around four o'clock, Morton. If you won't take my word for that — I was sitting in his card game—there are plenty of witnesses who can convince you of it."

From the doorway came Vance Drake's explosive retort: "Ride a couple miles down the River Road and size up the boy's dead mule, Sheriff. I suppose Malone plugged that mule from the back window of the Fashion!"

Sheriff Brissard's rheumy eyes touched JC's and slid away.

"Can you prove that Spud Malone dry-gulched your mule, son? Proof that would stand up in court, if you swear out a complaint and I arrest Spud?"

JC laughed shortly. "Of course I got no proof, Sheriff. I didn't see who fired that shot. It couldn't have been Spud Malone, if he was here in town all the time, fist-fighting with that roulette hombre."

Brissard turned to Dorgan for his next cue. The cattleman was turning away. "You'll retract your charges against one of my employees, then, JC?"

"I didn't make any charges in the first place, Dorgan."

The range boss flushed, slapping his leg with a quirt. Then he linked his arm through the sheriff's and grated, "It's no use arguing with these people, Buzz. I was foolish to let you drag me over here to face Morton in the first place."

At the foot of the steps, just inside the fanwise spread of lamplight spilling from the Drake paror, Matt Dorgan turned to brandish his quirt at JC.

"I want no more foolishness from you, young fellow. The moment you pulled into town I told you what to do with that barbed wire. See that you obey my suggestion."

JC Morton made no reply. He watched Buzz Brissard go trotting off in the darkness, following Dorgan like a mongrel pup with its tail between its legs.

THE TOUCH of Susie's arm on his snapped JC back to reality. The heady aroma of her hair was in his nostrils as she whispered, "There's a nice moon out tonight, darling. Let's go for a walk. Make plans for our wedding. Get your mind off that range hog, and that idiot who wears a law badge."

They headed across the yard and through the picket gate, turning west toward the river. Their favorite trysting place on moonlight nights such as this was the old ferry ramp at the foot of Main Street, abandoned since the bridge put the pioneer ferry out of business twenty years ago.

Arm in arm, they stood peering at the moonglades on the water, listening to the music of the bullfrogs in the cattails lining the river, drinking in the magic of the night and the odor of pungent willowbrake.

"We can be married any time we want, JC. Matt Dorgan can't stop that," Susie said, breaking a long silence.

"He can stop me from earning a living, if I don't find a way to get that bobwire downriver to the Co-op. That's—"

Suddenly JC stiffened, a broad grin touching his lips. He ran splayed fingers through his shock of rusty hair.

"Honey," he said in a shaky voice, "I know how to outwit that Bar D Bar blockade. The Forty-niners pushed their prairie schooners across rivers in flood. By golly, honey—"

He seized Susie in a bear-hug, smothering her with kisses.

"Julius Ceasar Morton!" Susie gasped, when she got the chance. "What's come over you? If I didn't love you so much I—I'd be angry."

JC Morton laughed and said, "I'm heading for Dutch Kinddahl's blacksmith shop this minute to borrow some logging chains. I'll put a cottonwood log on either side of my wagon box and roll the whole shebang

down this old ferry ramp into deep water, Susie. River's full, this time of year. I'm going to float my wagon down to them homesteaders—tonight!"

STARS had wheeled to midnight position in the silvered sky by the time JC Morton unhitched his mules from the Conestoga. The big wagon wheels were chocked with wooden blocks, midway down the old ferry ramp. The high-boxed wagon bed, originally calked for river crossings, bore an odd resemblance to a ship on wheels.

Outriding either side of the box were two cottonwood logs, snaked over from Benson's wood yard by Vance Drake's team. They were lashed in place with heavy lengths of chain borrowed from Dutch Kinddahl's blacksmith shop.

Big Dutch was muttering profanely as he unbolted the tongue and singletrees from the upper end of the canted wagon.

"Fool idea in the first place," the habitually pessimistic blacksmith complained. "You'll hang up on the fust mud bar below the bridge, and maroon yoreself. Be a laughing stock for the whole valley, your bobwire rusting out in the middle of the river until next spring's freshets wash it down-canyon."

JC Morton was up in the wagon, stowing a long hickory pole—formerly a flagstaff at the Trailfork school — which he would use for steering the mudwagon down the channel. On his way back from Dutch's place at the far end of town he had dropped by Grote's livery to pick up his Winchester and belt gun and a couple of boxes of ammunition for each.

He didn't anticipate any need for using guns on this night ride down the Strawberry, though. Their preparations had been carried out in the strictest secrecy. No one had seen the mules haul the rickety old Conestoga over to the riverbank from Vance Drake's place; no one had seen the three men block-and-tackle the massive cottonwood logs into position beside the box.

"Take my chances on grounding on a bar, Dutch," JC Morton said jubilantly. "Current runs about three miles an hour. I'll be grounding on Tomahawk Ford right in front of Jeff Conroy's shack by daylight, easy enough for the Co-ops to haul me out with their plow horses."

From the black shadows alongside the wagon Susie called out, laughing.

"And Matt Dorgan's bunch drinking and gambling at the Fashion, not suspecting a thing. Dad, you've got to admit I'm marrying a genius."

Dutch Kinddahl lifted the big hickory wagon tongue, its singletrees attached, onto the Conestoga with as little effort as if he were handling a toothpick.

"I'd give a dollar," Vance Drake chuckled from up on the bank where he waited with the mules, "to see Dorgan's face when he finds that them sodbusters are stringing bobwire."

Finally all was in readiness. The moon went behind a cloud, giving an interval of comparative darkness to mask the launching. But this far from the center of town, no one would witness—

From the path which led along the river tules to the wagon bridge upstream came Sheriff Buzz Brissard's familiar nasal whine. "What's going on here? That you, Dutch?"

JC Morton felt his heart sink as he saw Dorgan's trained mongrel stalking out of the shadows to stare at the wagon.

"Sheriff," JC choked out, "if you tattle about this to Dorgan tonight I'll poke that tin star down your mangy gullet!"

JC's voice lashed at the blacksmith, standing by the off front wheel: "Knock those blocks out and let 'er roll, Dutch. Susie—adios. See you at church in the morning."

Kinddahl aimed a massive boot at the chock holding the near wheel. When it was loose he rounded the lower end of the wagon and, using a peavy, managed to pry the second block loose.

The Conestoga, gathering momentum on the twenty-degree incline of the old ferry ramp, started rolling riverward. JC Morton braced himself as the butt ends of the cottonwood logs hit the water with a geysering splash, completely drenching him with spray.

A MOMENT LATER the ancient pilings of the ferry slip were alongside; the wheels lost contact with the ramp and the unwieldy freight wagon surged out into the metallic ripples like some clumsy, box-ended scow.

The grip of the current hit the Conestoga broadside and sloughed it around, making the lights of Main Street's honkytonks wheel dizzily in Morton's eyes. Water gushed through cracks in the ancient wagon box, sides and bottom, and sluiced noisily around the spooled barbwire under the tarp cover.

In midriver the current took over and the wagon, buoyant as a barge on its outrider logs, began drifting downstream, tailgate pointing south.

Morton heard Dutch Kinddahl talking to the sheriff, over on the bank, now slipping astern. He heard a mule bray, heard Susie's father shout, "Good luck, kid!"

"So long, Susie!" Morton called, watching the scrub cottonwoods at the foot of Second Street slip past to eastward. The river had already floated him two blocks on his way.

"What do you mean, so long?" a girl's voice startled JC, alarmingly close at hand. "Do you think I'd miss boating on the river in the moonlight with you, Julius Caesar?"

Gripping his hardwood steering pole, standing upright on the driver's seat at the up-river end of his wagon, JC Morton twisted around to stare. He was in time to see Susie Drake clambering out from under the wagon sheet, the moon's rays catching her towsled blond head as it nosed out from behind a fleecy cloud bank.

"Susie!" JC bellowed in outrage. "You dive off and swim for shore!"

The girl was crawling toward him along the edge of the wagon, picking her way across the taut canvas.

"Whoever heard of a ship captain jettisoning his crew?" she laughed. "You better keep an eye on that mud bar downstream at the tannery, JC. We don't want to run aground within sight of town!"

A mile down-river from Trailfork, a series of jutting gravel bars safely behind them, the wagon entered the black gut of the lower canyon, where the river sliced its way between towering tufa walls to get past Bunchgrass Ridge. The high rimrocks cut off the moonlight here, and JC, having fished this stream in a rowboat since he was a boy, knew the hazards he faced in this dark. In the main channel they had a good three feet of water under the running gear, but if the current tangled them up on a bar—

They were squarely under the summit of Bunchgrass Ridge, hundred-foot cliffs on either side where the river narrowed and the pinched waters ran like a millrace, when the freight wagon ground to a sickening halt, the hind wheels wedged into mud and gravel bottom.

In the darkness JC heard Susie choke back a cry of despair, huddled beside him on the wagon seat.

"It's that sandbar where we picnicked on Labor Day," Susie said. "We're too deep into the canyon for horses to get us off, JC."

Morton, sharing the girl's sense of panic, stripped off his boots and climbed into the swift-running water, careful to maintain a good grip on a wheel. The Strawberry's silt-laden flow came waist-high. There would be no poling the heavy vehicle free of the encroaching mud. He could sense that the tons of weight were settling deeper by the minute.

"Box will float, with those logs chained to 'em," JC called up to the girl silhouetted against the stars. "I'll unbolt the running gear—bolsters, bull bar and all."

USING a heavy wrench from the jockey box, Morton crawled under the wagon and went to work on the king bolt. An hour of this, and numbness brought on by the river's icy flow, forced him to climb back topside, the front end of the running gear free of the mud but the larger hind wheels mired to the hubs and still connected to the box—and sinking deeper into the gluey muck.

JC had lost track of time. The moon had set, but the sky was turning pearl-gray. Drenched to the skin, aching in every

tissue, JC was close to admitting he was licked. It would take at least another hour to unbolt the rear end.

He did setting-up exercises to unlimber, Susie massaging his aching arms. The right side of the wagon was setting at an alarming rate, the current already thrusting at the big log on that side.

"Water's undermining us—might tip the whole shebang over and spill the bobbed wire. If that happens while I'm down under, Susie, you dive for it. You swim like a fish. I'll be right behind you."

The sense that time was fast running out on him sent JC Morton back into the icy flow, fighting rust-clogged bolts with a frenzied desperation.

Daylight came, gray and rosy, when the bottom of the wagon box was below the river level, forcing JC to work under water in minute-long spurts. The settling had ceased, indicating that the iron-tired wheels had hit bedrock.

It was a full hour and a half after sunrise when the last bolt came free and JC Morton, letting his big wrench go to the bottom, swam out from under. The current had already seized the freed wagon box; JC had to swim with frantic strokes to get a grip on the hickory pole which Susie held out for him, as the mired running gear, half awash, was left behind them.

Sick with fatigue and cold, JC scrambled back on board. The Conestoga box, freed of the dragging weight of wheels and undercarriage, was riding the muddy river like a real boat now, the front end pointing down-river.

The cliffs were dropping away; they were through the Bunchgrass gorge, in view of the valley where a dozen homesteads lined the west bank. The riverbed widened and shallowed, the swift current lessening. There were no bars to worry about between here and the dead end of Tomahawk Ford, where white water ran inches deep over a broad shelf of gravel.

"We've won, Susie!" JC grinned, his teeth chattering with cold. "My wagon won't ever roll again, though, unless I can scare up another set of wheels. But—"

He broke off, stiffening, his eyes on a lone horseman who was spurring down the sloping rimrock directly aflank of them from the direction of the River Road.

"It's the sheriff!" Susie exclaimed, recognizing old Buzz Brissard by his fleabait blue roan. "And he isn't wearing his star."

JC's jaw locked angrily. The Trailfork lawman was spurring close to the edge of the river now, not fifty feet from them, his roan keeping pace with the mudwagon's drift.

"JC," yelled the sheriff. "Got to warn you. Dive off. Swim over here—"

Morton cupped hands to mouth and shouted back, "Like hell I will! Two more miles and I've delivered my freight. You can't stop me, even if Matt Dorgan gave you orders!"

Brissard shook his head. He was gesturing frantically downstream.

"Dorgan an' two or three of his gunnies are at Tomahawk Ford, JC, waitin' to gun you down and burn the wagon. Pole over here and climb off while you can—"

Morton reached for his lever-action repeater. Tomahawk Ford was out of sight behind a bend of the river ahead, but in a very few minutes they would be in range of Dorgan's guns. Unless this was a trick. Unless Brissard was lying.

Susie yelled at the sheriff who was keeping pace beside them, "How did Dorgan know we were on the river—if you didn't tell him, Buzz?"

Brissard flushed. "I—did tell Matt what you were up to, last night. But I didn't think he'd go gunning for you. When he told me that I resigned. Rode down the river to ketch up with you—"

Brissard was telling the truth. Morton sensed that. A showdown was coming, around that river bend ahead. This was no place for Susie.

The girl was caught totally by surprise. JC's brawny arms lifted her bodily off the seat and in the next instant she was hurtling overboard, to land with a noisy splash in the river.

When she surfaced in a smother of foam it was to see the sheriff's horse wading out toward her, Brissard leaning from stirrups to give her a hand as she stood up in waist-

deep water. The Conestoga was out in mid-river, too far away to overtake by swimming. She had a glimpse of JC Morton ducking out of sight under the wagon tarp.

"JC!" Susie shouted, catching the sheriff's hand. "You can't face those killers all alone—"

But JC was out of sight under the canvas now. She doubted if he had heard her warning cry.

SITTING his horse at the east end of Tomahawk Ford, big Matt Dorgan saw the floating Conestoga bump head-on into the gravel bar, the river flow surging around it.

Levering a shell into the breech of his rifle, Dorgan turned to Spud Malone, seated on the bay gelding at his right stirrup. Behind them were two other Bar D Bar riders, Winchesters balanced on their saddle pommels.

"Sheriff tipped 'em off, all right," the ranch boss grated. "JC and the girl abandoned the wagon up-river. I told you that was old Buzz we saw riding the other bank."

Spud Malone's shoulders stirred indifferently as he stared at the grounded wagon. His vision wasn't too good this morning, with both eyes puffed up in greenish-purple pouches.

"Take those cans of coal oil over there," Dorgan instructed his ramrod, indicating two five-gallon tins of kerosene lashed behind Malone's cantle. "Soak down the wagon good and set fire to it. That bob-wire won't be worth salvaging."

Malone shook his head, insubordinate for the first time since he had joined Dorgan's payroll.

"Not me. Too much chance Morton an' his girl friends are scrooched down inside that box, waiting with guns."

Dorgan ripped out an oath. "He ain't got that much guts! The wagon's empty, I tell you!"

Malone reined his horse around, brushing past the other two riders. He said angrily, "Don't forget that we're in sight of Jeff Conroy's house. He'll see us burnin' their property and fetch in a U. S. Marshal to handle things, now that your trained monkey Brissard has tossed in his star."

Dismounting, Spud Malone unslung the two cans of kerosene and loaded them on his boss's horse. He knew he was fired; this was his last act as a Bar D rider.

Matt Dorgan said furiously, "Spud, you yellow-bellied fool, Morton wouldn't dare ride that wagon down here, knowing we were waiting!"

"You don't know Morton when he's on the peck, Matt. I wouldn't ride over to that wagon for all the gold dust in Arizona."

Dorgan went white around the mouth. Then, thrusting his .45-70 into its boot, he jerked up his reins and spurred his black Arabian out into the river shallows.

"When I get back to the ranch," Dorgan shouted over his shoulder, "you'd better be gone, Spud. I won't have any yellowbellies working for me."

Spud growled indifferently, "Boss, I'm already on my way."

Through hock-deep water, Dorgan's horse worked its way out to midriver. He had a sixgun in one hand, watching the Conestoga warily, positive it was empty but ready to admit that if Morton was man enough to whip Malone, maybe—

Reining up at the front end of the wagon, Dorgan hoisted the five-gallon oil cans up onto the driver's seat. Then he swung one leg out of stirrup and reached for the wagon box. He was like that, half on horseback, one boot planted on the wagon, when the black bore of a six-shooter slid over the edge of the box and JC Morton's freckled face emerged from under the canvas tarp.

"Drop the gun, Matt," the redhead ordered. "Tell your gunhawks to skedaddle—if they line a gunsight on me you're smack in the line of fire. Tell 'em even a deer rifle couldn't drill that cottonwood log between me an' them."

MATT DORGAN'S head swam. He was looking at death, down Morton's gunbarrel. Jerking his head around to face his two riders on the east bank, Dorgan shouted, "On your way, boys. Morton's holding all the aces."

Not until the two Bar D riders had headed off in the direction Spud Malone had taken, toward Trailfork, did JC Morton climb into the open. Reaching out, he jerked the Colt .45 from Dorgan's hand and flipped it into the river. Dorgan, having his hands full maintaining his balance, made no sign of resistance as Morton lifted his spare .45 from holster and hurled it into the river.

"Sheriff'll be along directly," Morton said. "Taking off his star didn't signify anything. I'm swearing out a warrant for your arrest, for attempting to destroy property. These oil cans will be my evidence in court."

Dorgan caught sight of riders approaching the west bank. He recognized Buzz Brissard and Jeff Conroy and two or three other Co-op farmers who had assembled at Conroy's shack on their way to town for church. Susie Drake was riding double on the sheriff's roan.

"All right, kid," the Bar D Bar boss said heavily. "Mind if I get back in the saddle?"

"Okay—but stand hitched."

Dorgan got back in the stirrups. He saw Morton turn his head to wave at Susie and the approaching homesteaders—and in that instant Matt Dorgan made his play.

His right arm twitched and sunlight glinted on the stubby-barreled .41 derringer concealed in a cuff spring-clip holster. Jerking around to meet the threat of that point-blank gun, in the shaved clock-tick of time before Dorgan could lift his hide-out weapon, Morton knew it was a case of kill or be killed. Dorgan, in his insane desperation, had elected not to be taken alive.

The big .45 in JC's fist bucked and roared against the crotch of his thumb. His slug knocked Dorgan out of saddle, dead before he hit the water. The derringer exploded, its leaden ball ricocheting off the Strawberry's foamy ripples . . .

JC Morton hopped down off the grounded Conestoga box, hoisted Dorgan's half-submerged corpse up onto the wagon. Then he waded ashore through knee-deep water, suddenly more weary than he could ever remember being.

"There's your bobwire, Jeff," JC told the boss of the Co-op Association. "Easy enough to unload, spool by spool."

Susie Drake was out of the sheriff's saddle now, running toward him.

"Who knows what lies ahead?" one of the farmers muttered reverently. "With Dorgan gone, the valley will improve. Bar D Bar will fall apart without a boss."

JC Morton grinned down at Susie.

"We better be hustling back to town or we'll be late for church, honey-bun," he told her.

Susie laughed. "And then we have some arrangements to make with the parson, JC," she said.

RANCH FLICKER TALK

Coming in the next issue

A Roundup of Movie News and Views by

ROBERT CUMMINGS

•

Featuring a Review of 20th Century-Fox's

GARDEN OF EVIL

Starring

GARY COOPER and SUSAN HAYWARD

plus

A word and picture personality sketch of

GRACE KELLY

The Fighters

By Ben Frank

♥

THEY WERE GENTLE people, but together they'd be able to lick the world

♥

FOR THE last few minutes they had ridden in silence, with the low red sun and the white-capped Colorado Rockies behind them. The man's big hat was tipped back on his black hair, his dark eyes narrowed against his inward thoughts. The girl, bareheaded, was enjoying the spring breeze through her light-golden hair and against the fine suntanned skin of her lovely oval face. But she was also tensely aware of the too-quick beat of her young heart, for she knew that being alone with Cliff Diers like this might lead to something she wasn't quite ready to face. But, unable to fight any longer against her loneliness, she had consented almost eagerly to ride with him a ways toward Brunsville.

"I'd better turn back, Cliff," she said.

To their left lay the thick pines that sheltered a snow-fed spring that was the beginning of Whitehorse Creek. Miles to their right, a shadowy ridge marked the edge of the badlands. All else about them was a vast emptiness of hills and sky.

Cliff Diers turned to look at her through half-closed eyes. Big, dark, handsome in a

Helen wanted to believe he was the answer to her need

rough, tough way, he slowly smiled and swung to the ground, his deputy's badge glinting in the red sunlight.

"Let's talk," he said.

Instinctively, she knew what he had in mind. Yet she dropped down beside him, a rather small, willowy girl dressed in a gray split riding skirt and a white blouse that fitted snugly the soft round curves of her young body. She was nineteen, and her name was Helen McKinzie. She stood a little in front of the man, not daring to meet his gaze, but staring at the flaming sky. He put his arms about her and pulled her roughly back against his big, hard body.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" she said, trying to keep her voice steady. But somehow she knew that the beauty of the sunset meant little to a man like Cliff Diers.

"Helen," he turned her to face him, "isn't it about time for you to say you'll marry me?"

But he couldn't wait for her answer. He crushed her to him and kissed her with a bruising violence that was frightening. Yet, for the first time, she offered no resistance against his advances, for she was tired of fighting against her loneliness and wanted to believe that he was the answer to her need to love and be loved.

"Yes, Cliff," she said, "I'll marry you."

He kissed her again, and she did her best to respond. But her bruised mouth hurt, and the strength of his big fingers made her wince.

"Please, Cliff," she begged.

Laughing down at her, he let her go. "Just didn't want you to forget me before I see you next time, honey," he said.

AFTER he had ridden on, Helen stood beside her pony, again gazing at the reds and golds of the sky. She believed she should be wildly happy—and perhaps she was happy, in a way, to have this thing settled between her and Cliff. Yet she kept asking herself, "How can a girl know for sure if a certain man is right for her? Especially if she's never had a chance to meet other young men?"

She had been born on the lonely MK ranch in the foothills of the old Rockies. Out here, there had been very few opportunities to meet boys, to have dates. Not until Deputy Sheriff Cliff Diers had been stationed in Brunsville—and now, after knowing him four months—

Suddenly, she had an irresistible desire to go to the spring to wash her face. It was as if she believed the icy water against her hot skin would clear away her doubts. Swinging easily into the saddle, she rode toward the timber.

She was still a short distance from the spring when she heard the sobbing. Then a voice said brokenly, "Tommy, Tommy! Please, Tommy, open your eyes!"

Helen spurred her pony toward the spring. Breaking into a small clearing, she saw a tired looking team hitched to an old covered wagon. The sobbing came from the narrow rocky gorge that hid the spring. Leaping to the ground, she ran to the head of the gorge and saw a small overall-clad girl on her knees beside a long-legged man who lay sprawled on the rocks.

"What happened, honey?" Helen called as she began the dangerous descent.

The child looked up, revealing a tear-stained freckled face, frightened blue eyes, brown hair done up in braids.

"Tommy started down for water and slipped," she wailed.

Helen knelt beside the child. The man was young, perhaps not much older than she. He had a lean brown face, ears a little too large, a bony nose with a little hump in it; but his mouth was wide and generous, and he had a good chin. An ugly gash near his right temple bled steadily, staining the white rocks with red.

"I'm all right, Ginny," he mumbled, opening his eyes, which were as blue as a midday summer sky. "Just got a mite careless—" Seeing Helen, his voice choked off. "Hey," he gasped, trying to sit up, "where'd you come—"

His eyes closed, and he sank limply back against the rocks.

"Is he dead?" the child asked in a terrified whisper.

"Of course not," Helen assured her.

Between them, they managed to get him up the rocky slope and into the wagon.

Here Helen found a clean towel, and bandaged his head with it. Then she backed the wagon around and turned into the narrow trail that led into open country. On the way to the MK ranch she began to ask questions.

She learned that Ginny and Tommy Thomas were alone in the world; that Tommy was twenty, Ginny twelve. They had lived on a small ranch which Tommy had leased and run by himself, after the death of their father. Ginny couldn't remember much about her mother, who had died so long ago.

NO, GINNY wasn't sure where they were going. Oregon, she thought. They had been on the road five or six days—she'd sort of lost count. Why had they left their home, which was near a town called Benton? Ginny shook her head. To go to Oregon, she supposed. Tommy had come home late one afternoon and had said, "Sis, we're going to go places and see things."

That same evening he'd rigged up the covered wagon and loaded it with the things they wanted to keep and might need. They had pulled out shortly after dark, she remembered.

"It's been fun," Ginny said. "Until we stopped back there to camp, and Tommy fell and hurt himself."

She began to cry again, and Helen slipped an arm about the small, trembling shoulders and held her close.

"Nothing to cry about," she said cheerfully.

But when she glanced back at Tommy Thomas, who lay so still on the blankets in the bottom of the wagon, she wasn't so sure. You could never tell about a bang on the head like that. And then, thinking of what the child had told her, she began to wonder if the young man wasn't running away from something back in Benton.

Darkness had fallen by the time they reached the ranch house. Halting the wagon at the edge of the yard, Helen called her father and mother. They came running, frightened by the urgency in her voice.

She told what had happened, as they helped the injured man into the spare bedroom. Then she left her father and mother to look after him while she found something for Ginny to eat. After this, she put the child to bed in her own room, and then went out to look after her pony, which had followed the wagon to the house. Later, when she returned to the kitchen, she found her mother bustling about the oil stove.

"Tommy's not too bad hurt," the older woman said. "Nothing that rest and food won't cure."

She turned to look at her daughter, wistfulness in her eyes. "Ginny's a pretty little thing. Nice manners. Always wished you could have had a sister so it wouldn't be so lonely for you living way out here. Do you want to take this soup in to him, or shall I?"

"I'll take it," Helen answered, and, for some reason, her heart seemed to be chugging away much too fast.

She went into his room and turned up the light. He was lying on the old iron bed, either asleep or still dazed, she wasn't sure which. But the light seemed to arouse him.

"I won't tell who killed him," he mumbled thickly.

Startled, she almost spilled the hot soup. Suddenly his eyes flew open and fixed on her. Remembering her, he grinned.

"Heck of a note," he said gingerly, touching the bandage. "Me with a busted head. First real headache I ever had, too. Man, is she banging away! Is Ginny all right?"

She assured him that Ginny was fine, and gave him a taste of soup.

He made a wry face. "Nothing wrong with the soup," he said, trying to grin, "but something tells me it wouldn't stay down. Let's try it again in the morning, huh?"

HE CLOSED his eyes and lay very still. She put a hand on his forehead and realized he had some temperature. Before she could remove her hand, however, he caught it in his and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"Thanks, Helen," he said. "Thanks for everything. Sis and I will try not to be trouble. We'll pull out in the morning."

"We'll see about that when morning comes," she said.

He opened his eyes, and she had a notion that fear lurked behind the quick look he gave her.

"Got to go on in the morning," he said. "Oregon's a long way from here, you know."

He closed his eyes again tiredly, but still he clung to her hand. She stood there, watching his young face slowly relax as he sank back into troubled sleep, and a strange feeling of warmness flooded through her. For the first time, Helen McKinzie had met a man who seemed to really need her. Smiling, she slipped her fingers from his and crept silently from the room.

It wasn't until after she had gone to bed that she remembered she'd forgotten to tell her parents of her promise to marry Cliff Diers.

The following morning, Tommy was unable to stand more than a few moments at a time. He was completely disgusted about this business of being so helpless.

"Funny thing is," he said to Helen, "I don't feel so bad. But when I stand up, your house goes in circles. Hey, you don't need to rush away."

But she left him, anyway, and closed the door. She knew that quietness and rest were what he needed at this time.

Cliff Diers came riding up to the ranch that afternoon. By then Helen had told her father and mother about her and Cliff. In a way, they had seemed pleased. Yet, she knew, they were a little unhappy about it.

"Going to miss you, baby," her father had said.

Now, however, they welcomed Cliff warmly and invited him in. After they had made some tentative plans for a June wedding, Helen took Cliff in to meet Tommy.

"Tommy, this is Cliff Diers," she introduced. "Cliff and I are engaged to be married in June, you know."

Of course, Tommy didn't know it until that moment, and something in his eyes seemed to curl up and die. Then his gaze moved slowly over the big dark man until it halted on the lawman's badge. Watching, Helen knew that he was both startled and a little frightened by that badge. But he managed a good enough grin and said, "In my book, Mr. Diers, you're a lucky man."

Mrs. McKinzie invited Cliff to stay for supper. Later, Helen walked with him out into the wide moon-swept yard.

"I thought we'd never have a chance to be alone," he said, putting an arm about her possessively and pulling her close. "Why must we wait a month, Helen? Why not be married next week and—" The sound of footsteps stopped him.

TURNING, Helen saw Ginny skipping toward them.

"Hi," the child said, grinning impishly up at them. "Gee, the moon makes it almost like daytime. I—"

"Beat it, kid!" Cliff cut in angrily. "Three's a crowd, you know."

For a startled moment, Ginny stared up at him wide-eyed. Then, her small shoulders sagging, she ran to the house.

"Kids!" Cliff kicked viciously at a stone. "Always nosing around."

"She didn't mean any harm," Helen said quietly. And now a tiny lump of cold seemed to be forming in her heart. "Ginny's a sweet kid and I wish I had a sister like her."

"Well, I'm glad you haven't." Cliff swept her into his arms again. "Now to go on from where I left off."

He kissed her passionately, but when he released her, the lump of cold was still in her heart. It stayed with her after he was gone, and grew a little larger when she went into the house and saw Ginny curled up on a chair in the corner of the living room, looking like a kicked puppy.

"I didn't mean to make Mr. Diers angry," she said, tears squeezing out of her eyes. "I was just—"

"Forget it, honey," Helen broke in. She put an arm about the small sagging shoulders and drew the child close.

Ginny snuggled against her. "You smell good," she said. "I like you better than anyone—except Tommy. I like everything here. Your father and mother—I guess I don't ever want to leave. And I didn't mind a bit to leave Benton."

"Honey," Helen said, "think real hard. Did something unusual happen back home the day you and Tommy left for Oregon?"

Ginny frowned. "Tommy went to town or someplace, that's all. Why? Is something wrong?"

Helen smilingly shook her head and changed the subject. "Time for us kids to get to bed, don't you think?"

The next morning Tommy was up and around some. In the afternoon he came out to where Helen was planting flower seeds along the front walk. She was dressed in jeans and a blue shirt, and the sun and breeze tangled warmly with her bright hair.

For a long minute he just stood there and stared at her.

"If I were an artist," he said, a grin pulling at the corners of his wide mouth, "I'd get busy and paint your picture. But as it is, I'll just have to try and remember how you look."

Then, frowning, he sank down on an old stump near the walk. "Helen, I'm on the spot. Ginny's pestering me to stay here. Seems she's adopted you and your folks. Your dad says he needs a hand this spring, and there's no sense in us going on for a few more weeks. And your mother—know what she's up to?"

"Hard to tell," Helen answered smilingly.

"Making some of your outgrown dresses over for Ginny. She says we can't possibly leave until she has Ginny rigged up like a young lady should be." His eyes, she saw, were deeply troubled. "I'd like to help out here. But—"

"There's no rush to go on, is there?" she asked.

"I don't know," he answered, shoving to his feet.

HE WALKED on toward the horse barn—stumbling some, for he was still weak from his fall.

Watching him, Helen suddenly knew that when Tommy and Ginny went away she would be more lonely than before.

"But that's crazy!" she told herself. "Cliff and I will be married and living in town."

Cliff Diers, who disliked children . . . Impatient with her thinking, she shoved to her feet and went into the house.

Her mother was trying a dress on Ginny, whose eyes were wide and excited by the wonder of this kind woman being so nice to her.

"Look, Helen," Mr. McKinzie said, "ain't she going to be the prettiest thing you ever saw?"

Tall, graying, his blue eyes twinkling, he stood in the kitchen doorway, watching the glowing expression on Ginny's face.

"Not pretty," Helen said. "Beautiful!"

"Scat, you two!" Mrs. McKinzie said around a mouthful of pins. "How can the child stand still with you two talking about her like that?"

Laughing, Helen went into the kitchen with her father.

"I like those two youngsters, Helen," he said seriously. "Now that you'll be leaving us soon—well, I've been trying to talk Tommy into working for me. I could use a young fellow like him around here. And I figure Ginny would liven things up for your mother."

For a moment, Helen wondered if she should tell him that Tommy was running away from something. But no, she decided. This was something for Tommy to tell, or keep to himself.

She saw nothing more of Tommy that afternoon, until supper time. By then he had reached a decision.

"Mr. McKinzie," he said, "I'll stay on for a while. At least till you get the spring work lined up and under control."

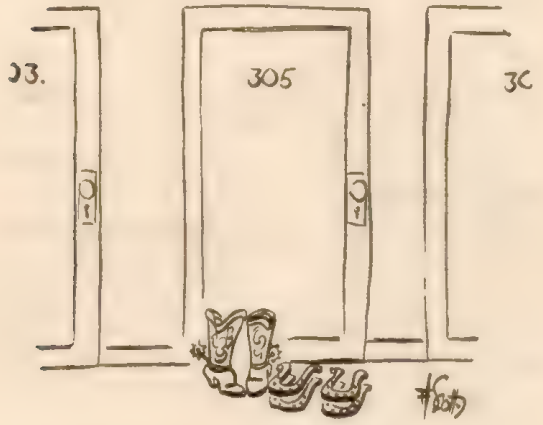
But he avoided meeting Helen's eyes, and her womanly intuition told her why. He had thought things through carefully. She was soon to marry another, and he himself was running away from trouble. She was beyond his wildest dreams and hopes, and he must never, never let himself fall in love with her.

"Good," her father was saying heartily. "In another few days I'll put you to work on my north line fence."

Helen glanced at her mother. Mrs. McKinzie's eyes were fixed happily on Ginny. This woman who loved children was losing

a daughter soon, but for a time, at least, she had found another one to love and make over. Helen felt a lump squeeze up in her throat. She was lucky to be the daughter of these two swell people, and she knew it.

Cliff Diers rode out to the MK on a bright Sunday afternoon. He seemed both surprised and angry to find Tommy and Ginny still at the ranch. When evening came he caught and saddled Helen's pony,



and they went riding off toward the badlands south of the MK.

"CAN'T understand it," he growled. "Your old man hiring a stranger he doesn't know anything about, when he could pick up a good hand in town."

"Not a hand with a kid sister like Ginny," Helen said, chuckling. "Mother's having the time of her life, making clothes for that kid. And dad's given her a pony to ride."

Cliff pulled up short, slid to the ground and began building a smoke. "Funny a brother and his kid sister would strike out alone for Oregon in a covered wagon," he muttered.

She dropped down beside him. "Why not?" A trickle of uneasiness ran through her. "A lot of people are moving to Oregon these days."

Cliff blew an angry stream of smoke into the night air. "Still seems funny to me." He tossed his cigarette away and put his arms about her. "Maybe I ought to write to the sheriff in Benton and find out a few things about this Tommy Thomas."

"I can tell you about him," she said quickly. "He had a chance to sell his lease and his cattle at a profit. That free land in Oregon sounded good to him, so—"

"What's the matter? Don't you want me to write about him?" Then before she could find an answer, he went on, "But I didn't bring you out here to talk about Thomas."

Putting a big hand under her chin, he lifted her face and kissed her. But she hadn't quite forgotten his dislike for Ginny. And his roughness made her draw away from him.

"What the hell's wrong with you?" he demanded. "Ever since that tramp moved in on you, you've acted as cold as ice."

"Please, Cliff—" she began.

He put his big hands on her shoulders and gave her a shake. "Maybe you and this Tommy Thomas are getting too friendly. Maybe you ought to know I don't want the girl I'm going to marry playing around with anyone else."

"I'm not playing around with anyone else."

"How do I know? I can't stay out here and watch you. We'll quit fooling around, and get married next week. We'll—"

She suddenly knew that this was the end of the road for her and Cliff. She jerked away from him and swung back into the saddle.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly, "but I made a mistake when I said I'd marry you."

"Maybe I made a mistake when I asked you."

Without bothering to reply, she wheeled her horse.

"Wait," he said. "We both lost our tempers. Let's be sensible and talk this thing over."

She kept on going.

"We'll see," he called, his voice sending a chill over her. "We'll see what made this Thomas take a notion to leave his home and head for Oregon."

Frightened, she spurred her pony into a run. But as she felt the rush of night wind against her face, she began to have a new sense of freedom. How did a girl know when she was in love? She wasn't quite sure. But she was sure of one thing—a girl could not be in love with a man who refused to trust her.

DURING the next few days she scarcely saw Tommy Thomas, for he and her father left before sunup to work on the distant line fence, and seldom returned before sundown. However, on Friday afternoon, when she went out to shut off the windmill against a rising west wind, Tommy came driving some half-grown calves toward the corral at the end of the big barn.

When he started to ease around toward the closed gate, she called, "Wait a moment; I'll open it."

She felt the tug of the wind as she ran toward the corral. Laughing, closing her eyes against a swirl of dust, she slid back the wooden bar.

"Watch it!" Tommy called. But his warning came too late.

Released, the heavy wooden gate came alive in a sudden burst of wind. Before she could leap aside it swung against her. With a startled cry, she stumbled and fell. The next thing she knew, Tommy had her in his arms.

"Are you hurt, Helen?" he asked huskily.

She saw the sick fear for her in his eyes. She felt his arms tighten about her. And suddenly she was clinging to him with all her strength.

"No, Tommy," she began, "just—"

And, in that moment, they both knew how it was.

"Helen," he said. He said her name over and over as if it were the only word he knew. And she put her face up to his and felt his lips burning against hers.

"Tommy," she whispered, "I guess I've been afraid all along that this was never going to happen to us."

"I guess it had to happen," he said. "I think I knew that when I opened my eyes and saw you for the first time. Only—well, afterwards I knew it was something that mustn't ever happen."

"Because of Cliff?" She pressed her cheek against his face. "Cliff and I are through, Tommy. Through!"

"No, not Cliff," he said, a tiredness coming into his voice. "There's something else."

He helped her to her feet and stood looking off across the wind-swept hills, seeming to have forgotten her.

"Tell me, Tommy," she said, touching his arm.

He shook his head. "Nothing much to tell."

But she knew better than that. "Tommy, that first night you were here, I heard you say something about a killing. You were half-asleep and—"

The expression on his face stopped her for a moment. Then she plunged on. "Tell me, Tommy." She knew now what it was to be in love with someone. You wanted to help him. You wanted to fight for him. And you'd give your own life to save his. "Tommy, I love—"

"Don't say it!" He moved away from her and put his hands into his pockets. "Wait," he said, smiling faintly. "Wait till I go back to Benton and straighten out a few kinks."

"No, Tommy!"

She couldn't give him up, and she knew that whatever he was going back for might take him away from her forever. "What's happened in the past doesn't matter."

"It does to me," he said. "And to you, too."

HE STUDIED her white, frightened face for a moment. "I guess it's time I told you about Al and Ring Shrader," he said. "I was looking for some strays along a creek and ran onto Al and a cattle buyer from Omaha, just in time to see Al pull a gun and shoot him. This buyer carried a lot of cash with him and I suppose that's what Al was after. Anyway, I turned back into the timber, thinking I'd circle around and ride to Benton to tell

(Turn to page 88)

"They Took Away My Child!"

"I begged and pleaded for a second chance, but the court ruled against me. I had betrayed my husband's love! Now I was paying the bitter penalty—the loss of my child, forever!" ***You'll want to read***

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the sheriff what I'd seen. I'd never seen a man killed before. I was scared, Helen—scared half to death.

"Then I met Ring, who was riding from town. He's younger than Al, but he's cut after the same pattern. And I knew that even if Al was hanged or locked up for life, Ring would be left. Sooner or later he'd make me pay, if I told on Al."

Tommy wasn't looking at her now. "I'm no fighter, Helen," he said hoarsely.

"Neither am I," she said to herself, thinking of her loneliness and how she had let it drive her into Cliff Diers' arms.

"And I had Ginny to think about, too," he went on. "So instead of going to town and doing the right thing, I went home.

"Al hadn't seen me, but Ring had. Maybe, I thought, they'd put two and two together and figure I knew what Al had done. Maybe they wouldn't. But either way, I knew that Ginny and I had time enough to clear out before they came looking for me. And there was nothing to keep us there. I hadn't bought my spring feeders yet. And I hadn't signed the lease for the coming year. So—"

Suddenly a great flood of relief ran through her, for her first quick thought was, "This is nothing. Tommy will be safe here. No one will ever know—" Then she looked into his eyes and knew how wrong she was.

She could never have Tommy Thomas until this thing was settled, and they both knew it. Having something like this hanging over them would haunt them forever, ruining whatever chance they might have for a good life together.

"Of course, you'll have to go back and tell the sheriff what you know," she said. "Now that Ginny will have a home here if you—"

She couldn't say the rest of it.

"The fence is finished," he said. "No reason why I can't leave right away. I'll tell Ginny and your folks I'm going back to collect on a bad debt, or something like that. No use worrying them."

By sundown he was ready to leave, on an MK pony. He took Ginny in his arms and hugged her until she squealed.

"You behave yourself, Sis," he said.

Then he looked longingly at Helen, but he didn't touch her. "See you," he said and swung up into the saddle.

Just like that he was gone, and Helen knew for the first time what it was like to be terribly frightened. She slipped into her room, closed the door, and flung herself across the bed.

"Please let him come back to me!" she whispered over and over.

Outside the window, a robin called sleepily to its mate and then became silent.

EARLY the next morning, Mr. and Mrs. McKinzie headed toward Brunsville in the old springwagon for some much-needed provisions. Helen and Ginny finished up the housework and then went out into the warm sunshine. Suddenly too restless to stay at the house, Helen suggested a ride to the spring.

"Swell!" Ginny agreed. "Only let's make it a picnic. You saddle the horses and I'll make sandwiches."

Walking toward the big barn, Helen knew why she wanted to go to the spring. It was there where she'd first met Tommy. Remembering, a soft smile touched her warm red mouth.

Stepping around the corner of the barn, she saw the two men waiting for her.

"Easy, miss!" the tall one said.

He had a gun in his hand. He'd pulled his hat down to his eyes and had tied a red bandana over the lower part of his face. The second man was likewise masked.

"We don't want to hurt you," the tall man said. "We just want to see Tommy Thomas."

"He's not here," she managed through stiff lips.

"Then you'd better go get him," the man said softly. "We've been watching the house all morning. We know you're alone here with his sister. We'll just take charge of her while you go after him. If you don't bring him to the house," his voice grew harsh, "the little girl will get hurt pretty bad, miss!"

She put a hand against the barn to steady herself.

"You don't understand," she said faintly. "Tommy's gone away. He won't be back for several days."

Of course, they didn't believe her.

"Go get him!" the tall man said. "We know he's here. You come back with him. Understand?"

They turned and hurried around the corner of the barn. Too terrified to move, she heard a door slam, heard Ginny cry out in sudden alarm.

Blindly she stumbled along the side of the barn. She came to the door and halted. She could think of nothing to do but stand there and pray for a miracle. And lifting her eyes, she saw the miracle—Tommy Thomas riding toward her on a stumbling, exhausted MK pony.

One glance at her white face, and he leaped to the ground and took her in his arms.

"Two men with guns," she whispered. "They're in the house with Ginny." Then she had to know. "What brought you back, Tommy?"

He took half a minute to tell her: "Stopped for breakfast at a ranch. A cowboy noticed the brand on my horse, said two men had stopped there the night before, inquiring the way to the MK. I came back on a hunch. I've been afraid all along that Al and Ring Shrader might come looking for me. Couldn't understand how they'd know I worked here, but—"

"Cliff Diers!" she gasped. "Cliff must have written to Benton about you. Tommy, what do they want with you?" But she knew the answer. They wanted to make sure that Tommy Thomas would never take a notion to return to Benton to tell what he'd witnessed. "They were masked, Tommy." Now she was grasping at straws. "Perhaps it's not the Shraders, after all." But she knew why they were masked—so that Ginny wouldn't recognize them, so that she herself couldn't identify them.

BUT NOW Tommy had turned away and was hurrying along the side of the barn—unarmed, afraid, yet not once thinking of shying away from what he had to do to keep Ginny from being harmed. And knowing this was the way it had to be, Helen didn't try to stop him.

She caught up with him and said, "They told me I had to come to the house with you, Tommy. That's their way of making sure I won't go for help."

She put her hand in his and felt his fingers tighten. They stepped around the corner of the barn and saw the shorter man standing in the shade of the old house, a gun in his hand.

"That's Ring," Tommy whispered.

"Hurry it up, you two!" Ring Shrader said grimly.

They went into the kitchen through the rear door. Ginny and the other man were in there. Ginny, trying to build a sandwich, but too frightened to make her hands behave. Al Shrader, his eyes smouldering between hat brim and red bandana, watched her. He swung around to face Helen.

"I see you found him," he said, a sneer in his voice. "I thought you would. Now you can fix some sandwiches for us to take along." He faced Tommy. "Sit down on that chair against the wall, Thomas."

"What are you going to do with Tommy?"

Helen hadn't intended to ask the question, for it was a foolish one. But it had slipped out inadvertently.

Al Shrader laughed sourly. "Show him the badlands. Might even lose him out there, you never can tell. Better go get the horses."

Ring holstered his gun and went stamping heavily out of the house.

Helen stepped over to the work table. She knew what she had to do. She had to put up some kind of a fight to save Tommy's life, even if it cost her own.

She glanced at her bare hands, which were no good at all against a man and a gun. She stared down at the table. Bread, homemade butter on a plate, a cold roast, a butcher knife. She picked up the knife. The man's eyes were fixed on her. She cut a slab of meat, laid it on a slice of bread.

"Ginny," she said, "fetch the mustard from the cupboard."

Mechanically, Ginny crossed the room,

and the man's eyes flickered in her direction. At that moment, Helen threw the knife at his head and cried, "Hit him, Tommy!"

Al Shrader cursed, ducked, brought his gun around. Tommy came to his feet and flung the chair.

The knife went clattering harmlessly against the wall, but a leg of the chair caught the man at the base of the skull. He went sprawling to the floor, still holding his gun, and lifted it toward Helen. But he was dazed and the shot went wild. Before he could make a second try, Tommy had kicked the gun from his hand. When he tried to get up Tommy hit him with a rung of the broken chair.

Outside, Ring Shrader had heard the shot. Letting the horses go, he turned back. Crouching low, he came pounding up to the door, shouldered it wide.

Helen saw the man's gun lift. Her scream was cut short by a blast that seemed to rock the entire house. She saw Ring stumble back through the open door and go down in a twisted heap. Turning dazedly, she saw Al Shrader's smoking gun in Tommy's hand.

"Tommy," she heard herself say, "you *are* a fighter!"

Likely it was a fool thing to say. But it was the first thing that popped into her head after that first quick glance at him.

"Not by myself," he said, grinning, taking her in his arms. "But with your help, I reckon I could lick the whole world."

Which was likely a fool thing for him to say, too, at a time like this. But to Helen McKinzie, he couldn't have said anything that would have pleased her more.

"Tommy, we'll lick the world," she whispered and lifted her face to his.

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. Mrs. Pete Kitchen won frontier fame for her lone stand against Apaches on a little ranch near the present town of Nogales, in what state?

2. For which type of saddle is the so-called "forward seat" style of riding generally considered more suitable, Western or English?

3. Jack Casement was neither cowboy, gunman, outlaw, sheriff, marshal, soldier, scout, miner or preacher, but he won considerable fame in Colorado and Utah around 1867—doing what?

4. What New Mexico border town was raided by Pancho Villa's guerrillas in 1916?

5. With a population of only about 3,000, Ozona is said to be the wealthiest little town in the world, thanks chiefly to nearby oilfields—in what state?

6. What, besides the phrase's literal meaning, did old-time cowboys sometimes mean when they say a man was "all spraddled out?"

7. What state has 52 peaks 14,000 feet or over in altitude, and 830 more 11,000 feet or higher?

8. In old-time cowboy slanguage, what was a "Pecos swap?"

9. *Espuela, estrella, rueda, sombrero, media luna* and *cabeza de vaca* were the commonly known Spanish names of early-day Southwestern brands. Give the English meaning of at least two.

10. Various combinations with such names as McCue, Nick, Poco, Joe, etc. are often used to indicate certain blood strains in what breed of what animals?

——Rattlesnake Robert

You will find the answers to these questions on page 109. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

High Country Devil

a fact story of
North Woods wild life
by
Ferris Weddle

PIERRE ROLLAN was pale and trembling as he entered the Northern Ontario trading post. He faced Ben Murphy, the post factor, defiance in his dark eyes.

"Ben, I no trap for you any more, "he announced. "You give me some other work to finish pay off what I owe you."

An angry refusal came to Ben Murphy's lips; then he paused, speaking carefully and quietly. "You're the best trapper in the northwoods, Pierre. Now what's happened?"

The trapper spoke one word. "Carcajou!"

Murphy felt a tingle of fear. "Hit your line, eh?"

"And me!" Pierre held up a torn sleeve, revealing a poorly bandaged arm. The blood had seeped through. "I fight him. Wounded him—then he attack." He shook his head. "No, I do not go back. For three days the beast has fouled my sets. Every place I go, he goes. An evil spirit."

Murphy sighed. Although only half Indian, Pierre was like the full-blooded Indians and Eskimos—they all feared Carcajou, the wolverine. And sometimes, the trader reflected, he feared the animal, too.

"All right. Tomorrow I'll go with you to the cabin. Maybe you killed the devil."

Pierre's eyes were disbelieving—one never really killed a wolverine. Always their spirit was about.

The next day, on webs, the trader and his trapper approached the small cabin on an isolated creek. The inside of the cabin was as disordered as if a whirlwind had gone through it. Bedding was torn apart; cooking utensils were scattered; furniture was gnawed and scratched; and tins of food had been gnawed open. A terrible stench hovered in the cabin. It made Ben Murphy's stomach turn.

"You see?" Pierre asked, then pointed to the blood in the snow. "He still lives. The cabin was not that way when I left."

"Well, you shouldn't have left!" the trader said angrily. "Oh hell, I'll get some one to help you change the line. No sense in trying to leave it here."

IT IS ACTION such as described that has given the wolverine the bad reputation it has, and earned it the undying hatred, mixed with fear, of all northwoods trappers. Called also the Glutton and Skunk Bear, the wolverine by any name is an awe-inspiring beast.

Man's feeling about this largest member of the weasel family approaches the supernatural. The Indians call it "The Evil One" and "Indian Devil." They believe the animal is a messenger of devil gods, particularly of the dreaded female god, Piya. Despite their denials, many sourdoughs of the north country share this feeling with the Indians and Eskimos.

What is this mammal which causes even brave men to tingle with fear of the unknown?

Carcajou, or the wolverine, reaches a weight of twenty to thirty-five pounds, with a length of about three feet including the bushy tail. Resembling a small bear in its robustness, the wolverine has long, cruel claws and very powerful jaws. Its temperament is viciousness incarnate when it is aroused. And usually, according to most reports, the animal is in a state of anger!

The nickname of Glutton comes from the apparently never-satisfied appetite of the animal. Biologists claim the wolverine doesn't eat any more than other wild creatures in comparison to its size, yet trappers insist that the animal must always be hungry. Or does it rob traps and food caches just for the sake of plundering? That's a good question which has puzzled naturalists and scientists. Often there appears little motive behind the animal's plundering. Much of the food is wasted, or fouled with the terrible musk the wolverine throws off.

Much larger animals, like the bear and cougar, will sidestep entaglement with a hungry carcajou. One northwoods trapper, on the trail of a cougar, witnessed a battle between the two predators.

Hidden by a snow-covered knoll, he heard a terrific upheaval ahead—screams, snarls and growls mingled in a weird chorus. Rushing to the top of the knoll, he stood hidden by some brush. In a small ravine two furry figures rolled by some brush. The long, tawny body of the cougar was unmistakable—but it took a few seconds for the trapper to identify the smaller brownish opponent as a wolverine.

The battle was gory to the last. Claws and fangs ripped into hide and flesh. Then abruptly it appeared that the wolverine balled himself up beneath the cougar's stomach. His heavily clawed feet lashed, and the mountain lion was disembowled. The wolverine moved back, then ran over to the carcass of a yearling moose.

HIGH COUNTRY DEVIL

The trapper had no rifle, only a revolver he used to shoot some of the catches in his trap sets. He shouted and started down the hill, thinking that he was probably crazy. The wolverine apparently had had enough battle. He turned and left in an odd, galloping run.

WOLVES and coyotes have been known to bypass the wolverine, too. Usually, however, the hungry animal is content with gophers, marmots and other rodents. In cases of famine he isn't choosy. He robs trap lines and unattended and unlocked cabins. He will, in rare instances, attack such big game animals as the caribou and moose.

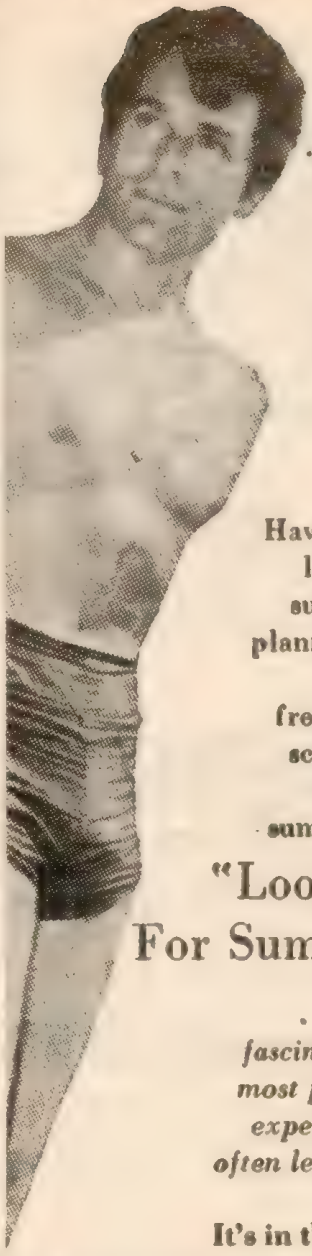
The female wolverine has a worse temper, if possible, than the male, especially when she is guarding her young, which come in litters of from two to five in the spring. One tenderfoot tried to investigate the lair of the wolverine. He retreated hurriedly and fearfully when the mother wolverine bounded out of the cave, her teeth bared!

Economically the wolverine is of little value. Its grizzle-tipped fur has been prized in the north for use in making parkas and robes. The long hair keeps off frost better than other types of fur.

The animal is also valuable in keeping rodents under control.

The tales told about the Indian Devil indicate that the animal is abundant, but this is far from true. In fact they are so scarce —and so secretive in habit—outdoorsmen may never see one in a lifetime. Once they ranged rather widely over the northernmost Western states. Today, few are found outside of Alaska and Canada. Alaska has recently begun paying bounty on the animals.

Many naturalists, biologists and lovers of the outdoors feel that bounty payment is unnecessary on such a scarce animal. The Wolverine's trail is fading out. The damage it inflicts on trappers is small, and in many wilderness areas there is room for Carcajou, The Evil One. It is a fascinating part of our wildlife scene.



What's Wrong With Summer Love?

Have you left room for love on that exciting summer vacation you planned? It can happen, you know, and frequently does. Learn screen star, Fernando Lamas' recipe for a summer love that *lasts!*

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Ruth backed off, and the panther moved after her

Woman's Work

By Evelyn Rice

THE VERY first night Jeff was gone, all heck broke loose in the chicken house. Not even awake, Ruth jumped clear out of bed. The fox terrier, Fritzie, promoted now to house dog, came barreling out from under the bed, his little throat bursting with dog oaths, and clawed at the door till Ruth let him out.

Stevie woke up howling, of course. Shushing him before Tommy in the cradle should wake, too, was a job, for he felt his mother's fear. Suddenly the din of battle outside broke off in a dreadful wail from Fritzie, and within seconds there was a frantic pounding at the door.

It could be nothing less than a grizzly bear. Poking Stevie under the covers, Ruth threw her small body against the door. *Oh, Jeff, Jeff!* she thought wildly. Outside, Fritzie whined, and, trembling, Ruth pulled the door open one inch.

COURAGE can have many names. Sometimes it's a mother's love or a woman's pride. . . .

A horrid smell smacked her square in the face.

"Skunked!" she moaned in weak relief. Then, stronger: "Get away, you stinking monster!"

Fritzie hung his head. "I just wish you were Jeff," his mistress snapped. "I'd kick you from here to Ed Bailey's place!"

The door slammed and the bolt shot home. In the dim starlight of the cabin yard, Fritzie wagged his stub tail sadly and slunk under the step. He figured the mistress was all blow, but the way things had been going, he just couldn't be sure . . .

There was no use for Ruth to try to go back to sleep. She was too scared and too mad. Lighting a candle, she saw to the babies' covers, smoothed her own bed, and crawled in with an old magazine. Not until a big drop splashed the page did she know she was crying.

Jeff would laugh at that, she thought bleakly. Laugh, and then pull her into his strong arms, hold her head against his big chest, pet her, and say wonderfully nice things in his rumbly young voice . . . like he'd tried to do the other day, but she was mean and wouldn't let him. Recalling the day, Ruth wished she had it back to do over. Such a small thing!

SHE'D been warming a pan of milk for Sunflower. (A quart a day wasn't enough, but Sunflower was an orphan, and the Jersey had her own calf to feed, as well as two human babies.) From the yard, Jeff had hollered for the rifle and Ruth had come running with the 30-30. He'd cussed and yelled that he wanted the .22 like she was a mind reader or something, and she'd stomped her foot at him for cussing—

And after all, it was only a garden snake. Jeff had glimpsed it streaking under the cabin and thought it was a rattler. Snatching Stevie up, Ruth had flounced him away from his nasty old dad who swore, and Jeff had trotted behind, laughing and reaching for her. She would have made up only, when she got inside, she found that Sunflower's milk had boiled all over the top of her range.

That did it. She made a scene. Jeff, hang him, had been sweet, but he never saw what was really biting her: loneliness and fear. Every day, every hour, she was almost crazy with wanting to go home. How could you put so much wanting into words?

She was no pioneer, she'd never pretended to be. She was a town girl, raised with gas lights and hand pumps; there was even a sink in her father's house. With her first sight, early this spring, of the long mountain valley where Jeff had chosen to homestead, a nameless dread had settled deep in her bones. That lonely valley, those craggy hills that rimmed it—who knew what awful things lived in those jumbled boulders, that dark brush? At night there were noises—

Coyotes, Jeff said. Huh. Would a coyote have chased Sunflower's Holstein mother into that rocky gulch where Jeff found her with a broken back? Cows were born clumsy, Jeff told her. The Holstein had fallen in.

And it wasn't just for herself that she was afraid. "Stevie's two, Jeff, he's out in the yard all day."

"Nothing's going to get him, honey."

"Nothing! You thought yourself that was a rattler just now!"

Jeff had shaken his dark head impatiently. "Well, it wasn't. Ruth, you've got to get over—"

She wouldn't listen. Scowling at her ruined stove top, Jeff had started talking about this fool job for the power company. He could take a team of horses up on Indian Creek and contract cutting poles for the new power line.

"They offered it to Ed Bailey, but he didn't want it. Honey, I can make us a mint of money by fall." He went on about the things they could buy—a new stove, comforts for the cabin, new clothes. That was all he could see. Fix things up nice, and Ruth would like it better. There were simply no words to make Jeff see that she would fear Long Valley if it were sitting spang on a diamond mine.

So that's how it was. Yesterday, Jeff had taken the team and pulled out for Indian Creek. Ruth had tried to be brave. She loved Jeff, and since his stubborn mind

was made up, she wouldn't let him down; and he'd promised to come home every two weeks. But after he was gone, and she was alone, there was nothing left but the numbing fear.

"Coward," she whispered into the magazine, upside down on her bent knees. "He'll be back Sunday-week." She blew out the candle. Lying in the darkness, she thought about Sunday-week and tried not to think of Monday-week, when he would be gone again.

IN THE morning, Ed Bailey came down from his place, five miles back in the hills. Ruth was doing her chores, keeping clear of the odorous Fritzie, and trying not to be sick from the smell, all at the same time.

"Pheeeww!" From the back of his old roan, Ed grinned maliciously down at her. "You had company, smells like."

Her stomach curdled right up. Bad enough this whiskery old goat had to sic Jeff on the pole job. Now must he come and gloat over her?

"Company?" she echoed coolly. "Why, yes, I guess there was a skunk around last night."

He snickered. He wasn't fooled, she thought. The old man knew how she liked being left alone. He ought to know; he'd had a wife once, a town woman, who left him when she couldn't stand the hills any longer.

"Thought you might take some help with the chores," he offered easily.

"I don't need any help." It wasn't woman's work, but if Jeff thought she could handle the job, it was sure none of Ed Bailey's business. "Thank you very much anyway," she added grudgingly.

"You're welcome." His eyes gleamed. "Dog needs washing."

She nodded curtly, hoping he would be snubbed and leave. But he swung off the roan and went into the chicken house. Presently he came out with the headless victims of last night's massacre. He found a shovel and buried them, grunting something about enough stink around here as it was. He inspected the ditch that headed back in the hills, the tiny pond where the stock watered, and the garden, swelling with late springtime promise. "Be sure and give them beans plenty of water," he said, running a hand over Sunflower's ribby sides.

It got on Ruth's nerves. She'd be doggoned if he was going to walk in and take over, even if she was a dumb town girl.

"Mr. Bailey," she said firmly, "I thank you and all that, but I can handle things fine by myself. Honestly."

"Heck, I'm glad to help a neighbor out."

He meant Jeff, not her. "If I need help, I'll call." She tried to sound pleasant, or anyway civil. "Jeff'll be home Sunday-week, and what I haven't done he can set right."

The sprawling white eyebrows rose. "Jeff ain't workin' all summer like he figured?"

"Of course he is. But he's going to come home every two weeks."

Bailey spat with quiet finality. "Man can't make no money that way."

Abruptly, Ruth said she guessed Stevie was awake now, and marched into the cabin. After a while she saw him mount and ride off, without a glance toward her.

"The old—old—" Ruth couldn't think of a name, except one of Jeff's that a lady wouldn't use. Bailey had chased her Jeff away, and now he was poking and prying around. "I suppose he's made a bet with himself about how long I'll last!" With a toss of her head, she decided she wouldn't wash Fritzie at all.

It wasn't so easy to be spunky when long shadows began to fill the valley, the hens roosted and the stock bedded down, and the babble of the ditch turned into the ominous whisper of night water everywhere. And it got harder as the days passed. Every night brought its own terrors—coyotes chanting insanely in the hills, screams and coughs and cries of unnamed predators. Even the little hoot owl in the oak tree beside the cabin startled her once. But she wasn't afraid of him. She'd seen him by day, and he was just a cute little ball of feathers.

He was about the only thing, she admitted, that she wasn't afraid of.

THE HOOTOWL and the dawn. When Jeff was home she disliked seeing morning come, but now she welcomed it. With daylight the prowlers left. Stevie and Tommy woke, and their small needs were company for her.

At last it was Sunday, and Jeff would be home in just seven days. Monday, six. Tuesday, five. Wednesday, she dug into her trunk for her prettiest cotton dress, and washed it to freshen the ruffles. She washed her hair so it would be just right by Sunday. She had just finished fixing it in soft brown curls when Ed Bailey rode in.

He had a letter in his hand. She could see her name in Jeff's heavy writing, while the old man stubbornly withheld it until he could say just how he happened to have it.

"One of the boys quit the power company yesterday. How he came to quit—" and on and on. "—so Jeff gave him this letter to give you."

Burning with impatience, Ruth reached for her letter. She knew he hung around, but from almost the first word, she forgot him in her stunned disbelief. ". . . good timber . . . another fellow contracting, I don't want him to . . . don't know when I'll be home . . . sure hope you don't mind too much . . ."

After the letter had silently slid into its envelope and into her pocket, Bailey's voice jarred her. "Jeff ain't coming Sunday?"

Her face must have given her away. "No." She saw spite and triumph in his sharp eyes, and felt some stirring of spirit. "He's working in some good timber right now." But it hurt too bad to pretend it didn't. Bailey saw that and, grunting with something like satisfaction, he dismounted to putter around, as he had the week before. Crushed, Ruth sank onto the step.

It wasn't fair, she thought hotly. Jeff and she had made—well, almost a *pact*. He'd *promised*. And she had tried so hard to be a man, or at least a great big girl—

"Ain't had no muddy water?" Bailey called.

She shook her head. What did the old snoop care if the ditch ran molasses?

"Old sow and her pigs got out yesterday," he muttered. "Might get to rooting up the head of your ditch."

She didn't care if Bailey's old sow turned into a bed of violets. Closing her ears to his mumbling, she forlornly considered the future. Gathering force, far back in her mind, was a tremendous rage. Jeff had no right—a husband's place was—

Bailey climbed into the roan. "Couldn't do anything for you in town, I suppose?"

"Town? Are you going into town?" It was like saying, are you going to Heaven?

"Sunday." He bit off a hunk of tobacco and made a lump in his grizzled cheek. "Got business at the courthouse." He studied her scornfully. "Leaving early. Put up at the Stoner ranch Sunday night. Get to town Monday forenoon. Come back end of the week."

"There's nothing, thanks—"

He spat into a rosebush. "I'm taking the buckboard. You and the kids are welcome if you should take the notion . . . just be down to the road by seven." And he was gone.

OLD CUSS knew how to plant a seed and let it grow, Ruth thought angrily, as she hoed the garden that afternoon while the babies napped. If you should take the notion, indeed! With each vicious dig of the hoe, Ruth's resentment flared. Jeff had let her down badly. In her heart she knew Ed Bailey was a warped, malicious old man, jealous that Jeff had a wife and he had not. A funny way to be, and it made her sick to think of his spiteful joy if she should leave Jeff.

Leave Jeff! Her eyes got round and her face burned. Where did such a horrid idea come from?

In the hot blue sky above, a chicken hawk circled. With something like a sob, she watched it. There was this cruel country for you! Work and slave and do without and hide your fears; hawks got your chickens and snakes got your eggs and buzzards got your cow and Bailey's pigs tore up your ditch and your garden died— Her grimy hands left mud streaks across her face. *Be down to the road by seven.* Darn him!

At suppertime the babbling of the ditch

stopped. Like that. One minute there was the gurgle of running water, the next minute utter silence. Ruth grabbed a bucket and ran outside.

There was simply no more water, save what stood in the stock pond, and that was sinking before her eyes. The ditch must have broken some time during the afternoon; busy with supper and the babies, Ruth hadn't noticed its slowing.

Hastily she filled the bucket from the pond and scooped up water for the washtub. Figuring whether this would last till Sunday, she ran up against a stone wall. Jeff wouldn't be home Sunday. Could she swallow her pride and ask Bailey? No, he had his plans made. It would put him out to take half the day to mend her ditch. Maybe she could catch him down at the road Sunday morning and ask him to fix it when he got back . . . but he wasn't coming back till the end of the week.

Frowning, she thought. If she could see him before he left for town—but it was a good five miles to his place. She couldn't leave the babies to traipse off there. And she sure couldn't carry two heavy youngsters that far. When you came right down to it, she was equally sure she couldn't ask him a favor.

Frantically she snatched up pots and pans. Already the pond was so low that mud ran into each pan. And now the stock were coming in, lowing casually among themselves. Well, panic wouldn't help any. They could drink tonight, and maybe they knew some secret spring in the valley.

She washed dishes in a scant cupful of water. Stevie had no bath, which suited him, but, perversely, he and Tommy developed a monstrous thirst.

"Careful, Stevie, don't waste it. Drink all you want, but don't spill any." His round eyes turned up to her, and half his drink splashed the floor.

The cattle trampled the pond that night. Next morning they hung around uneasily, nosing the mud, not really thirsty yet. Ruth put out a small panful of water for the chickens.

She had planned to water the garden today, but that was out now.

FRIDAY the cattle were beginning to suffer. The Jersey gave little milk. Ruth thought the garden looked limp. Stevie got into the mud, and she had to use almost a gallon from the tub to clean him up. She put out more water for the chickens, but the cattle got to it and turned it over.

They bawled all that night, and Ruth made up her mind. Early Saturday morning she packed a little flour sack with clothes for the babies—enough for Sunday night at the Stoner ranch—and set the cabin right for locking up.

"We're going to see Grandma," she told Stevie. She didn't say they weren't coming back. How could they stay? She saw now how utterly they were at the mercy of the ditch.

The garden could go fry—the stock, too. If they got thirsty enough they would range back into the hills where the ditch headed. They could always find water. She filled pans, and set them in the chicken house so the cattle couldn't get them. There was barely enough left for her and the babies that night.

Safe in town, she would tell Ed Bailey. It was his fault, and if he felt like coming home early to fix Jeff's ditch, let him. She'd ask him to do nothing for *her*.

But as she took a last look around, Saturday evening, she was troubled. Jeff had let her down, gallivanting off on a job of work, leaving her to run a haywire outfit best she could, but . . . The drooping garden dismayed her. The distressed cattle would have to make out. And then she remembered. Jeff's fence, back in the hills, cut them off from the head of the ditch.

She couldn't let them die. Aside from the pity she felt, they were all Jeff had. They, the team up on Indian Creek, and his garden and his home. And his hopes.

With a trembling sigh, she studied the hills. In broad daylight she might force herself to follow the ditchline into them. Nothing really bad prowled by day. But, hang it! How could she carry a shovel and a hoe and Tommy and likely Steve, too. It must be more than two miles to the head, she guessed. If there were some way she could leave the children. . . .

A plan was there. She wouldn't think of it at first, but it had to come.

At three, the babies would be asleep, but there would be light enough to get about. Day came fast after that. An hour to get to the head of the ditch, half an hour to mend it—if she could—an hour to get back. Five-thirty then, or nearly six. That would leave an hour to get the boys up and go down to the road to meet Bailey.

That's the way it had to be. If she *must* leave, she would do it right. She owed that to Jeff, at least. She put the boys to bed and set the alarm. Then a note for Jeff, a prim little explanation, all plain and reasonable, so he would know just why she must do this. But, once she started to write, words poured out, hot and angry. He would understand her this time, right enough. She didn't read the pages over, but pinned them to the table for him to see at once—when he got around to coming home.

She woke to find the cabin light. Throwing back the covers, she pressed off the alarm without looking at the clock. She'd awakened early—it was a good start.

The little boys slept deeply. Noiselessly she dressed and tiptoed out. Fritzie, still smelling to heaven, waited for her at the step, as if this dawn expedition were nothing unusual. She got the shovel and hoe—Jeff would laugh at that, he always said a hoe was woman's work—and brazenly debated taking the rifle. But it was too much extra to carry, she was mortally afraid of it, and in any event she didn't know how to shoot it. With the little dog at her heels and self-admiration in her heart, she took the dim path.

SURPRISING how light it was. She wished she'd looked at the clock, but knew she couldn't have overslept. Still, the nagging worry that she was late made her hurry.

And then—like that!—it was pitch dark. Frightened, she looked up. She was a full minute realizing what had happened.

The full moon had wakened her, and now it had slipped behind a cloud. It might be midnight, or one, surely not much more. There was no sign of dawn ot the east. She heard Fritzie stop, and felt his inquiring eyes upon her.

She would have fled for the cabin if it hadn't been for Fritzie. She didn't want him to see her cowardice. And she was pretty sure that if she once got inside those four walls, she wouldn't leave again till the sun was up.

"We've come this far," she quavered. "Come on, pup. If I can't see you, at least I can smell you good and plain."

Presently the moon was out again. Actually, it was all sort of thrilling. Working her way through the black dappled brush, she wished Jeff could see her now.

Only it was a heck of a long way. There was a gully with a plank to walk, beside a length of flume. There were bare, rocky patches. And there was the ominous oak and manzanita everywhere. It seemed hours later that they crawled through Jeff's line fence, more than a mile from the cabin. A long way still. But at last she heard water running and by moonlight saw where Bailey's pigs had torn up the ditch. It wasn't too hard to mend. She shoveled and hoed and sweated, and finally the little torrent was back in its channel.

"There, Fritz, she's done!" Exultingly she watched the dark water run. "Let's beat it home." She turned, and the dog bumped blindly against her legs. She could feel the quivering of his body. "I'll not carry you!" she exclaimed. She took a step or two, scooting him along with her feet. From deep inside, he growled, thin and shaky. Puzzled and scared, she looked at him. He cowered in her skirts, his sharp little face fixed on the path ahead.

And there, in the moonlight, a dozen paces off, she saw it: a huge tawny beast, still, with pale cold eyes upon her. She had never seen a panther before, but she could no more mistake it than she could mistake the chill breath of death that shook her.

There was no measure to the time she stood frozen, staring blankly into the cruel eyes. It ended only when the panther moved, sinking down, his long tail twitching.

Ruth's knees let go. House cats crouched so before they sprang. This, then, was the way Sunflower's mother died . . . Jeff must

have known. She would have fallen had Fritzie not growled again in puny defiance. Somehow she took courage from the dog.

She'd heard you could stare a panther down. That he wouldn't spring if you kept your eyes on him, if you spoke.

WETTING her lips, she forced sound from her throat. "Kitty," she squeaked, ridiculously. "You scat, now." She brandished the hoe, and took a deep breath. "I'm not scared of you, you big old cat," she boomed, taking a step. She talked as she moved, thrusting the hoe firmly ahead. "I'm going home now, you'd just better get out of my way." No sense to what she said. A few more steps and she would be upon him.

The tawny body moved. As easily as a house cat leaps upon a chair, the beast sprang to the ditch bank above them and crouched again. Turning to keep her face to him always, Ruth sidled past. She was beyond fear now and felt only a numbness. But her mind was clear, darting ahead, planning each step, and her voice ran on

Fritzie growled, and the panther cut in with an angry snarl. Sensing that the smell of skunk bothered him, she hurled taunts. "Don't like it, do you? Don't like it. Don't like it." She thanked God and Ed Bailey, impartially, that she hadn't washed the dog.

When they were past, the panther sprang onto the path behind them and padded in their steps. It was terribly slow going. Ruth was backing now, feeling her way. She must be careful, she thought. If she should stumble, if Fritzie should rush him—

Momentarily in the open, the panther didn't like it. He melted away into brush below. It took all her will not to run then. Seconds later, he appeared on the path ahead, and jumped the ditch to get above them. Now behind again. There was moonlight, and then there was shadow. Where the brush was thick and vines caught at her feet, she had to inch her way. She thought of the plank across the gully. No, the fence came first. She must plan ahead. . . .

She thought of her two little boys, asleep in the cabin. It hurt more than she could bear, but she saw them waking to an emptiness, a hunger and thirst without end. She saw Stevie crying, tugging at the door latch. She heard Tommy's baby wails grow hoarse until exhaustion silenced them forever. Fury seized her. She wondered if Sunflower's mother had felt such fury. . . .

And now they were at the fence, and she was ready for it. "That's because I'm smarter than you are, cat," she taunted him. "I can figure, you can't."

She had had some faint hope that the fence would turn him back, but he leapt it in a single fluid arching. He seemed to know that his time was growing short, for his circles tightened, and each time he held the path ahead a little longer. Ruth sensed the lightening of the sky to the east. She was getting hoarse, but dared not fall silent. Only her droning voice and the smell of skunk were keeping the cat from his kill.

Now the gully. Not too far now. And here, at last, the place where she had nearly turned back so long ago. "Hang on, Fritzie," she said, "we'll make it."

But Fritzie was gone, bolted. Words went dead in her throat. The panther slipped into the path ahead and stopped, facing her. This time he did not move on. The hated skunk-smell was gone, the nagging voice was still, and the kill was to be his. Ruth halted, and the cat crouched. The tip of his tail quivered; his long, flowing body gathered itself.

Ruth whispered, "God, please take Fritzie to Ed Bailey. Make him come."

For her the trail had run out. There was only the tiny chance that Bailey would find the babies before it was too late.

MUSCLES swelled under the tawny hide, and a boom of thunder broke. Again there was no measure of time. Thunder became a scream, and the sound was motion, a spasm of the golden body writhing on the earth. Then motion was sound again, a deep voice beside her. "Ruth, it's me. It's all right, Ruth."

The calm voice of Jeff. His arms held her. The rifle was hard against her shoulders. "It's all right, darling. Fritzie found me."

He wouldn't let her go for a long time. He talked to her, she heard his rumbly young voice. Later, stumbling beside him to the cabin, she heard words: "Ed Bailey came up yesterday where we're working and he— Well, so I came home. I'd just got there and found you gone when Fritzie came tearing in."

She was sorry for thinking Fritzie had bolted. He must have sensed Jeff's nearness. She wondered what Bailey had said to Jeff, and why. Did he mean for Jeff to come Sunday and find her gone? Or was there a spark of decency in the old coot after all? It couldn't matter less. Jeff had known she needed him, and he had come.

She ought to tell Jeff she wasn't afraid any more. The little things, the snakes, hawks, coyotes—they'd always bother her, she guessed. But she had faced the worst there was that night. She wasn't a town girl any more.

"I told Bailey before I left to come around and give you a hand," Jeff was scolding as they walked under the oak tree at their door, and at that very moment the little hoot owl sounded off, a foot and a half over his head. Jeff jumped twice that far and gurgled a terrible cussword. Choking off, he darted a shamed look at Ruth. "Little devil scares the living daylight out of me," he mumbled.

It was no time to laugh. Her wits were still about her. "Poor darling," she cried. "You're all unraveled." She touched his forehead. "You're cold as ice. I'll make a fire and we'll have some coffee." There was no fit water, but she could discover that later.

She pulled him in the door and herded him to a chair. Her letter—her hateful, whining letter—was on the table. Crumpling it, she dropped it in the firebox. Kindling went over it, and sticks of dry manzanita. She held a match down.

No way of knowing if Jeff had read it. She hoped not. He would never say. The fire flared, and she set the lid on. The letter was gone now.

In the dim light of dawn, she smiled at Jeff. "Know something? There's no water till the ditch clears up. There'll be no coffee now."

Carefully Jeff set the rifle against the wall. "Who wants coffee?" he asked simply.

Coming up in the next issue

ANGRY SPURS

Bitterness must be washed away with blood before ranchers and nesters can live in peace together

A Magazine-Length Novel

By WILL COTTON

BLIZZARD RANGE

He had not only the blizzard to fight—but the hate of a whole town, and the fury of a woman

Beginning an Exciting Serial

By TODHUNTER BALLARD

Exhausted and shocked, she stared at the man

Backfire

By Jeanne Williams

RAND GORDON stared down at where sharp little hoof tracks had churned the edges of the creek into an evil-smelling muck. Rand's gorge rose as he swung around to his horse, a big rangy grulla, who kept shifting and backing, the inside of his nostrils showing red.

"You don't like 'em either, huh, Shadow?" Rand grunted. He threw a long leg over the saddle, but held the uneasy Shadow on a tight rein for a second while he scanned those nasty, mincing little tracks again.

Sheep, all right—in cattle country.

THERE'S a big gulf between a rancher and a sheepherder

but it's different with a rancher and a shepherdess

Worst of all, the damn things were watering at Glass Creek, where Rand's cattle had to drink. Cows, unless they were nearly dead of thirst, wouldn't water after sheep.

Nudging Shadow along the withered trail marked by the sheep, Rand cussed himself for having drifted along and not filed papers on that strip of land that bordered Glass Creek on the east. He'd just figured no one would want a place that was only a few miles of hills sandwiched in between Rand's place, the R Bar G, and a big hunk of wildnerness owned by Slade Redmond, the lawyer in town who'd been trying to buy Rand out for the past six months.

Rand grimaced, pushing his hat back. Well, it was too late now to wish he'd filed. But he could have a talk with this sheepherder. The fellow must've sneaked into the country mighty quiet-like for Rand not to have heard about it till Brick Lewis, Rand's one cowhand, had ridden up in a sweat that morning and gasped out that there were sheep tracks along the creek. Rand had saddled Shadow, hoping Brick was joking.

This sheep trail wasn't any joke.

Growling, Rand followed it in and out through the hills, till finally, coming round a low spur, he saw what he was hunting.

Sheep, oh Lordy, sheep! Maybe a hundred, grazing close together like the stupid critters they were. Stretched out on a blanket by a tent was the scroungy sheepman who was trying to put Rand out of ranching.

That was how it looked to Rand, the way it'd seem to any cowman. Sheep—well, cattle hated them, and their owners followed suit. It was an antipathy as deep and driving as the urge to survive.

SOME of this blind fury welled up in Rand now as he stared toward the dirty-white, placidly grazing herd. He sent Shadow charging down the trail, scattering pebbles and earth. Scant yards from the sheepherder, Rand halted Shadow, just as the herder jumped up and whirled.

Gravel exploded from Shadow's braced hoofs, showering the herder; and so it was through a spray of dirt that Rand got his first look at his new neighbor.

The broad hat had fallen back, held by the chin cord which moved with the angry pulse of the girl's breathing. For it was a girl, a girl sheepherder, with hair like raw gold and blazing gray eyes. Her figure, even in the rough masculine garb, made Rand gasp and think it was a crime against nature for her to be out where only sheep—dumb, stupid sheep—could see her.

That harshly jerked him back to why he was there. He didn't like sitting up in the saddle, kind of—well, looking down on her, so, clumsily, he started to slide off.

"Hold it!" The grim voice seemed ridiculous, coming from between lips that made a man get all sorts of wild ideas. But the girl didn't seem to see anything funny about it, she looked mad enough to pull the trigger of the eight-inch-barrelled .45 Colt she had lined on Rand.

"Uh!" choked Rand. Plainly this girl had never been told just what did and what didn't become a woman. He straightened in the saddle, staring down at her.

"Now listen, miss, you—you don't need to wave that gun at me. Calm down and let's talk this over."

He was beginning to get mad. What was there about him to make her pull a gun before he'd said a word? Only back of her distrust and the reckless glint in her eyes, Rand caught a hint of something else. Fear?

"I've heard about you!" she snapped. "You're Rand Gordon, and you figure you run this neck of the woods. Well, you forgot one thing—this land I'm on doesn't belong to you! I—I'm going to file for it, and you can just turn around and get out of here!"

It was the first Rand had heard of such a bad reputation. This girl seemed to believe it like gospel, though. He gulped and shook his head. "Well, I'll be damned!" he exclaimed. "Probably!" said the girl, without cracking a smile.

Rand jerked like he'd been spurred. This girl played rough. Right then, he'd gladly have been arguing with half a dozen armed sheepmen than be trying to tell this girl she was going to have to get her sheep

away from where they'd ruin his range. He took a long breath and came out of the saddle, knocked her wrist up as the Colt spat a bullet past him.

Pretty or not, no one was going to shoot Rand just for the pure fun of it. He jerked the gun out of her hand and tossed it toward the little tent.

"Okay," he panted. "Now will you talk sense?"

"You!" she hissed. "You—you don't understand anything but guns and fists!"

She was close and warm. Rand's throat felt dry and he let go of her before he lost his head and showed her he could understand the lure of a pretty woman.

"Look, stop spitting fire and maybe we can get some place." He stepped around, blocking her path to the tent and her gun. "First, who are you?"

"Teresa Wilson." She watched him narrowly, but the fear was leaving and a half-smile twitched at her mouth as she gained assurance. "You see why I'm here. I don't see that there's anything else to be said."

"Just like that, when your damned sheep are stinking up the creek till my cattle won't drink?"

"If you'll just look," she flared, "you'll see that only the lower part of the bend of the creek is being used. I take them to water and keep them from mucking up but just a part of the creek. If your snooty old cows are too pernickety to drink upstream—why, then, it's time they died off, every darn one of 'em!"

RAND, thinking back, remembered the concentrated hoof marks. Teresa was telling the truth. It sort of shot a hole in one of his arguments. But he had some left.

"What'll you do when your woolies run out of graze? Turn 'em loose on my range?"

"You're nosier than a census taker. But," she added blandly, "I'll tell you, just to keep you from counting sheep nights. Slade Redmond's promised to lease me his tract just east of me."

"Redmond!" Rand yelled. "How—I mean, since when did that snake turn neighborly?" Because Redmond had done just about every legal trick in the book to get Rand to sell out.

"He's a sight more neighborly than you are!"

Taking a good long look at her, the curves softly firm beneath the old clothes, Rand felt blood pounding in his ears and jerked his gaze back to her face with an effort of will. He knew he shouldn't say it, but he did anyway. "Being a pretty girl might make anyone neighborly—even that low-down Redmond."

Her hands clenched and she flushed. But she didn't cry. She said, very slowly, as the sun fired the red gold of her hair, "Maybe you'll explain that, Mr. Gordon?"

Rand knew the lawyer, and the way he had with women, but now, watching Teresa, Rand knew there hadn't been any cheap love for her, not yet. But Redmond was smooth, charming. Teresa didn't know, she didn't even guess the effect she had on a man, the driving hunger she could wake.

Partly to warn her, but mostly because he couldn't help it, Rand reached out and brought her against him. When she fought, he arched her back and kissed her. Ruthlessly, achingly, till she went soft and consenting in his arms. Her moaning whisper broke on his lips. He was suddenly shamed, hating himself, the almost brutal way he'd handled her.

Drawing back, he held her till her eyes opened, but she was shaking, either from rage or something else, when he let go of her and wheeled toward his horse.

"I guess that explains it," he said. "It's dangerous for you to be here. What would it take to buy your sheep and get you to move back to town?"

Her eyes blazed. "More than you've got! I'm staying right here, and the day'll come when you'll sell out to me—when my sheep graze on your whole darned ranch! I taught school three years, saving every cent, so I could have a place of my own, and no two-legged wolf's going to stop me!"

Rand held his reins tight and his heart felt squeezed up and hurt as he stared at her. Sure, she thought he was a skunk, but he'd been trying to show her why she ought to be safe in town, not out all alone where

that Redmond could find her any time. Rand swallowed his pride.

"Teresa," he pleaded. "For your sake, don't!"

There was a brittle edge to her laugh. "Don't you worry about me! Worry about yourself! And if you come back here again, remember this: I've got a gun, and next time you won't get close enough to toss it away from me!"

Hard, unforgiving brightness showed in her smile. Rand felt sick and mixed up. "Fine," he said, looping Shadow around. "Just follow that practice with Redmond, too, will you?"

Before she could answer, he was up the trail, heading for town. He hadn't had a talk with Redmond for a mighty long time.

NOW THAT RAND was talking to Redmond, he decided it wasn't a pleasure. Slade Redmond had a way of moving like a big, poised cat, and he had manners as slick as varnish. Just the right amount of gray at each temple, making crisp black hair romantic to women, and a hearty, over-frank voice. He glanced at a fat gold watch.

"Nice to see you, Gordon," he drawled now, offering a ready-made cigarette which Rand declined, rolling his own. The lawyer stood up. "Let's go have a drink while we talk."

Slade was tall as Rand, but he was at least ten pounds heavier. His ruddy skin was just a mite soft-looking. Rand drew on his cigarette and shook his head. He drank only with friends.

"Don't have the time, Redmond. I was wondering if you knew anything about a girl who's taken to running sheep in that little wedge between the R Bar G and your land."

Redmond grinned. "Sure, I know Teresa. She and my sister back in Missouri were friends, and Sis wrote me that Teresa had a little money and wanted a place of her own. Naturally I thought right off of that little place."

"Naturally," Rand agreed drily. "Who thought of the sheep?"

"Don't like 'em?" Redmond laughed. "Well, Teresa had nothing like enough money, let alone land, to raise cattle. I suggested sheep. Thrifty and easy to handle." Rand glared, thunderstruck at the open admission which Redmond dismissed with a flip of his hand. "I got you a right pretty neighbor, Gordon. Should be worth putting up with sheep to be that close."

Rand knew Redmond was trying to get him mad. No use letting the grinning town man see he'd succeeded. As levelly as he could, Rand said, "Slade, you know damn well that girl's not safe out there. If you can talk her into moving to town—or better yet, into going back home—I'll gladly pay for the sheep and her expenses."

"My!" jeered Redmond. "You're big-hearted! That girl can take care of herself. Best thing for you to do is sell me the R Bar G. I wouldn't mind sheep if Teresa went with them."

That did it.

Rand stepped so close he could see the big pores in the other's face. "You mess with that girl," Rand said between his teeth, "and if she doesn't kill you, I will."

He whirled toward the door but as he shut it, Redmond's mocking voice followed him. "That might be hard to do, Gordon."

All the way home Rand kept telling himself Teresa was a pig-headed fool and if Redmond pestered her, it'd be her own fault. When he failed to convince himself of that, he hugged the fact that she had a gun and a mean temper; it wouldn't be easy for any man to get under her guard.

Rand bit his lips as a flood of self-accusation rushed up in him. He had slipped under her guard—and the only excuse at all was maybe it might make her wary, so that Redmond or any other prowling lad couldn't surprise her into losing her gun. She sure as heck would have it trained on him, Rand, if he went back.

Squaring his shoulders, Rand told himself he didn't want any truck with a spitfire girl who liked sheep better than cows, but when he tried to whistle, the notes stuck in his throat, and not just because he was thirsty.

The feel of her, soft and melting, clung

to his arms, bothering him. He couldn't lose the sense of loss and hunger that he'd never felt before. Rand tightened his hands on the oiled leather as her blazing, furious eyes rose up before him.

Miserably, he shrugged. She hated good and proper; he'd put himself way out of bounds when he'd grabbed her like he had. But what had she meant when she'd cried that some day sheep would run on the R Bar G?

Rand thinned his lips. Over his dead body they would!

RAND KEPT an eye on Glass Creek, but it was Brick Lewis who brought him the bad news, two days after Rand's set-to with Teresa and then Redmond. Brick came riding up to the corral where Rand was halter-breaking a colt.

"Rand!" he yelped, coming at a run. "That gal sheepherder's let her sheep range up and down the creek; they've waded around till our cows gotta go a mile upstream to drink. Next thing, she probably won't try to herd 'em at all, she'll just let the dang woollies ruin all the grass on both sides of the creek."

"Good Lord!" Rand groaned. He slipped the halter off the colt and watched it bolt, wishing he had as few troubles as it did. How in the name of mud do you fight a woman?

Brick was watching him anxiously. Rand whistled for Shadow, who was grazing on the slope beyond the corral, and headed for the barn to get his riding gear.

"Brick," he said mournfully. "If that girl shoots me, you can have the R Bar G."

Brick snorted. "No thanks, not with that sheep raisin' gal right over the creek! A man you can shoot or beat up—but not a woman."

That was so right, Rand reflected grimly, as he saddled Shadow, and loped for Glass Creek. But somehow he had to make Teresa give up her crazy plan. That damned Redmond! The lawyer knew Rand wouldn't let a man run sheep till the critters fouled the water and ruined the grass, but Redmond figured there was nothing Rand could do to a girl.

On a sudden thought, Rand sucked in his breath. Now what did most women make their career? Marriage. Maybe Teresa—His blood drummed, and he felt her in his arms again. Then he remembered her eyes, proud as the devil, as she had glared at him over her gun, and he frowned. He was getting way ahead of himself. Teresa sure hadn't seemed to have much use for him. But she'd been desperate for a place of her own, desperate enough to live in a tent and run sheep. And, hell, the R Bar G was a nice little spread. Of course she'd marry him!

Only, somehow, it stuck in his throat—being married to Teresa for business reasons. As far as he was concerned, there was more to it than that, a lot more.

He was alongside the creek now, and a glance showed that Brick was right. The sheep had ranged up and down the banks for a pretty long stretch. There were even some tracks on his side of the creek—choppy, grass-withering sheep tracks.

Shadow quivered at the smell and kept pulling at the reins as if begging Rand to ride away from the hateful, alien stink. Thinning his lips, Rand urged the horse across the creek and down the trail toward where Teresa's tent was.

SHE CAME OUT to meet him. Her chin was high and she had her gun, all right.

"That's far enough," she said. Her voice had the lash of a blue norther and that glorious hair of hers shone in the sun. It made Rand furious to see behind her the stinking, dirty herd she was bent on protecting.

"Teresa—" His voice was so harsh she stiffened in anger, but he couldn't gentle it. "Your sheep aren't keeping to the lower part of the creek."

"So what?"

Rand caught his breath. He held his neck so stiff that the muscles ached. She knew about it; it hadn't been an accident. "You know good and well my cattle won't drink where the sheep have been. First you took a little of the creek, now you've ruined a third of it! When do you aim to just let

your herd run loose and spoil the whole creek?"

"When I get good and ready!" Her nostrils arched and her eyes were steely as the gunbarrel. "You don't herd your cows to water, you let 'em drink where they want to! Well then, so can my sheep!"

"Damn it, that's different! Sheep'll drink after cows."

The pulse throbbed savagely in her soft throat. "Cows had better learn to water after sheep, then! You can't tell me what to do, Rand Gordon!"

"Ed, this is Mr. Kingsley, a rancher from Australia."

A kind of wild longing streaked through his baffled anger as he looked at her. Deliberately, he swung off Shadow and walked toward her. Her face paled. She leveled the gun at him.

"Don't! Not any closer!"

"Go on. Shoot. Isn't that what you want—me out of the way of your precious sheep?" He came on. She had tried to shoot him once, might try again, and he didn't care. Once more, anyway, he was going to have her close and sweet in his arms. And he did. When finally they drew apart, Rand was shaking. He said, "Teresa, Terry—will you marry me?"

The tremulous smile died on her mouth. Her eyes lost their shine. "What about my sheep?"

"Why—" Rand had forgotten all his very good reasons for asking her in that crazily breathless moment when they kissed. "I—I reckon we'd sell 'em, honey."

She grabbed up the gun, and there was no fooling in the action. "Don't—don't sweet-talk me!" Tears came into her eyes but she blinked fiercely. "Of all the dirty tricks! Make love to me—propose—just so you can get rid of my herd!"

"But Terry!" Rand choked, hurt and flabbergasted.

"Get!" She stamped her small scuffed boot almost on his toe. "I hate you! I'll blow your head off if you come back! And I'll run sheep up the creek until your horrid old cows die, every one of them!"

Whirling around, Rand got out. He had to before he boiled over and gave her a good shaking. Damned if he'd stand around and beg with a girl who thought more of a pack of sheep than she did of him! He sent Shadow streaking down the trail, but not so fast that he couldn't recognize the horseman trotting from the opposite direction toward Terry's camp.

Slade Redmond! Rand tensed in his stirrups and then sped on. Feeling the way he did, there'd be a shooting if he talked with the lawyer, because Rand would have staked his neck that Terry wouldn't hold a gun on Redmond during the man's visit. Mad as he was, Rand didn't aim to get shot or hung just yet. Not till he'd settled some things. So he rode home, cussing Redmond, sheep, and himself. He couldn't cuss Terry.

BRICK had no such compunction. At least he damned the whole class of sheepherders till Rand shut him up. Then the red-haired cowboy had fervently, feelingly sworn at sheep, and was still at it a hot afternoon three days since Rand had gotten his marriage offer slammed back down his throat.

"Rand," Brick groaned sadly, turning in his saddle. "You got to do something! This riding up and down, chasing sheep downstream—hell, we can't keep it up!"

Rand shrugged. "What else can I do?"

"If nothin' else," Brick flared, "we can shoot enough woollies to build a dam. I bet that'd put a stop to this!"

Rand was bone-tired, he hadn't slept well in a week. He knew Brick was straight, a good friend, but it took every bit of his will power not to pick a fight. "Let me do the worrying, Brick."

Brick glared. "Sure! You're damn right! I—" And then he broke off, pointing toward the hills beyond Rand. "Say—that's smoke! Fire!"

Rand whirled. He gasped as if he'd been hit in the ribs.

Smoke—on the ridge that made a rough boundary between the R Bar G and Terry's place. The thing most feared, most terrible, on the range. Rand put spurs to Shadow.

"Come on!" he yelled. "We'll have to set a backfire. There's a bunch of steers down in the valley!"

No time to think how it started. A belt of flame licked through the grass, curled hungrily up the sparse shrubs and ran on. Brick was down on his knees, starting the counter-fire. It was too late to hope to just stomp the blaze out, it spread in almost geometric straightness down the ridge—like it'd been set. Deliberately.

The ugly thought crashed in Rand's mind, but he was guarding and fanning the backfire, kicking the rubble and grass away from his side of it as fast as he could. Brick was doing the same. The backfire spread, eating toward the wilder, lustier blaze. With luck, and if the wind stayed tame, they could check it—on this side.

How about Terry's land?

Rand rubbed the sooty sweat from his face. He had to face it. She hated him, she wanted his range. What could be better than a fire eating up his range, engulfing the cattle? But—Terry was fiery and wild, but she wouldn't do this. He saw her then, dimly, through the smoke and flame. Across the fire, high on the ridge.

Why else would she be there, if she didn't set the fire? Rand gritted his teeth, spitting out cinders. She was battling the fire—it must have spread to her side. She was getting some of her own medicine. She couldn't stop it alone; she was trying to smother it with a blanket, tramping on the darting flames with ineffectual, desperate feet. There'd be scorched mutton on the other side of the ridge in an hour.

Rand whirled. "Brick! Go rope one of those steers and shoot it when you get it up on top of the ridge. We'll straddle the blaze on Terry's land!"

"You crazy?" Brick shrieked. "She started this fire!"

"Get that steer!" Rand barked. Brick swore, gulped, and then made for his horse.

RAND SPRINTED across the backfire, parted the blaze where it was dying for lack of fuel, and ran past Terry, sweeping the charred blanket away from her.

"You're just fanning it! Run down the edge and start a fire!" She stared at him in exhausted shock, her lips moving wordlessly. He gave her a little push, stuck matches in her hand.

"Go on. Start a backfire!"

She went. Rand was already kneeling, fanning up fire to fire. Brick was back with a steer, on the other side.

"Shoot him!" Randy shouted, bounding over. The steer had barely sunk ponderously down when Rand was upon it, his pocket knife tearing raggedly.

Brick helped. They slit the carcass, dragged the split, wet carcass across the ends of the blaze, working doggedly forward.

The bloody rawness of the steer hissed on the flames; they were smothering the advance edge of the fire. Farther up, the backfire Terry guarded was ending the battle.

Gasping, Rand let go of the steer's body. He could gladly have dropped on top of it, but he strode up the ridge to Terry and helped her stomp out the backfire. She was smudged, and parts of her clothes were burned. Rand looked at her and his love and belief in her betrayal of him were cruel-

er than the burns on his hands. She turned as if she couldn't bear to watch him.

"I—I guess in spite of everything, I ought to thank you," she whispered. Before Rand could say a word, she was whirling, stumbling off.

"Just a minute, Teresa!" The voice cracked harshly from the slope beyond them. It was Redmond. Rand clenched his hands.

Redmond! And the sheriff from town. Now what—Redmond jerked his horse to a halt, glaring at Rand, before he slid off and put a comforting arm around Terry.

"Teresa, you just tell the sheriff about this fire! He'll put that skunk Gordon, where he won't be burning you out!"

Rand's jaw hung. He made a noise in his throat—or maybe it was a desperate, breaking sound in his heart. *Terry—you planned this—with Redmond! The fire—then this!* The sheriff, who was friendly to cowmen, was staring at Rand like he couldn't believe his ears.

"Say, Rand, how about this—this deal?" the sheriff spluttered.

Rand shrugged. He knew with bitterness that no matter what she did, he couldn't turn Terry in; so he, Rand, would be in jail while sheep ran over the R Bar G, and Redmond— Oh, hell!

"You got eyes," Rand told the sheriff, and drove an elbow into the furiously choking Brick.

Terry jerked away from Redmond, her eyes narrowing. "Slade, how did you know about the fire? And who started it and where it was?"

The sheriff's mustache bobbled as he whirled around. "Yeah! How'd you know, Redmond?" He spat into the cinders and a sting grew in his voice. "Come to think of it, why didn't you stop and help put the fire out instead of riding into town after me? All of Miss Teresa's sheep could have burned while you were spreading the good news!"

Rand saw a glint, then, near the center of the burned area. With a little stirring of hope, he ran up and kicked it from the rubble. A nice, fat gold watch! A lawyer's watch.

He held it up, hardly feeling the burn of it on his fingers. "Lost something, Redmond?" Redmond's face turned purple. His hand curved toward his coat.

Rand sprang. He smashed his fist into that handsome, fleshy face, and swung again towards the chest. Redmond's hand fell from the shoulder holster. The lawyer went down in the rubble.

"He set it!" yelled Brick. "That watch! He dropped it while he was laying the fire!"

"Quit screeching," grunted the sheriff testily. "I got eyes!" Redmond was caught in his own backfire.

"Shut 'em!" Rand called, taking the space between him and Terry in a jump. He kissed her, and she didn't fight. Not even a bit.

"We're getting married," he told her, not asking.

"I'll buy a wedding dress." She laughed, half crying. "Just as soon as I sell those nasty sheep!"

Rand looked at her. Why—why he'd even raise sheep to please her! "Terry, you really want to sell 'em?"

"Why," she said, "I'd much rather have you!"

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 90)

1. Arizona.
2. English or flat saddle.
3. As construction boss building the eastern prong of the Union Pacific Railway which met the western prong at Promontory Point, Utah.
4. Columbus, N.M.
5. Texas—where else!
6. All dressed up.
7. Colorado.
8. Theft, stealing.
9. Espuela: spur. Estrella: star. Rueda: wheel. Sombrero: hat. Media luna: half moon. Cabeza de vaca: cow's head.
10. Quarter horses.

OUT OF THE CHUTES

THE PEOPLE who used to say that the automobile would never replace the horse look pretty silly when you think of a modern super highway swarming with cars, but in some circumstances they're absolutely right.

We heard a man declare recently, "A good man on a good horse is worth more than two crackerjacks in jeeps." He isn't a fuddy-duddy longing for the good old days. He's a Border Patrol official whose job it is to keep Mexican wetbacks from crossing illegally into American territory.

Anyone who reads the papers knows how tremendous the wetback problem is. Thousands of laborors sneak over the line without health examinations or any means of support. They make their way to the farmlands of the West and work for what to Americans would be starvation wages. Some of them even pay to be smuggled in, and there are people who have made fortunes supplying cheap labor to produce growers.

It's the Border Patrol's job to keep them out, or to round them up, when they have crossed the Border, and send them back again. And in that rugged, back-country terrain of Southern California, a man and a horse—if they're a good team—are indeed worth a couple of jeeps.

The best team we've heard of is a Patrolman named Gordon Wright, known as Lum, and a horse named Red Onions.

Red Onions is a lot more handsome and aristocratic than his name might indicate. In fact, he won considerable fame in Quarter Horse shows for his beauty, even before he displayed his brains on the job. His present owner is Patrol Inspector Leonard Gilman, who was a top-notch roper in Oregon before he joined the Patrol twelve years ago.

Gilman bought Red Onions after the stallion had already won a boxful of ribbons, planning to use him for a roping mount in local rodeos, and for breeding. But Gilman became so impressed with his disposition and smartness that he offered Red Onions on a rental basis to the government.

Lum Wright, the man who usually rides him, has been on patrol duty for twenty years, and he says he's never seen another horse like this one.

"He has a remarkable sense of direction which never fails him," says Lum. "He hears sounds that I often miss, but I can tell when something has alerted him. His ears prick up and I give him his head, and sure enough he goes straight to some clump of mesquite where someone is hiding. No matter how rocky or difficult the terrain is, Red Onions can always get where he wants to go."

He's a big horse, too, with plenty of stamina, and he's very eager and quick to learn. Red Onions goes to and from his job in a horse trailer, and he practically loads and unloads himself.

"Inside of sixty seconds after I've turned off the engine," says Gilman, "Red Onions will be out of the trailer and mounted."

Speed is often very important, since even when Red Onions is off duty, he's on call.

Gilman tells, for instance, about the time when a truckload of wetbacks were driven to within 200 yards of the Border guard. There the truck stopped abruptly and the whole gang of Mexicans scooted over the line in every direction.

The guards were surprised by this maneuver, and the aliens easily out-raced them, scurrying into the brush and the arroyos of the wild country. A rush call

was put in for Gilman and Wright, who arrived very quickly with Red Onions and another Patrol horse named Missy. Gilman, aboard Missy, decided to follow a set of tracks which he hoped might lead him to a rendezvous spot for all the wetbacks. Wright, on Red Onions, was sent out to beat the bushes.

The system worked fine. By the time Gilman had found a few of the aliens at the hideaway, Red Onions and Lum Wright had rounded up half of them. Within three hours of the time they'd started out, the entire gang had been caught.

This happened soon after Red had joined the Border Patrol, and the incident really sold Lum on the horse's savvy. "I might have missed some of those fellows," he said, "but Red Onions didn't."

When both horses and both men work together, it is generally in response to a special alert that a large group of wetbacks is making a run for it. They often also work with an airplane, which circles overhead and sends messages via walkie-talkie to the men on horseback. Gilman and Wright, though, feel that the airplane directions often are difficult to follow, and the best method is for the two of them to circle an area, flushing out the Mexicans as they go.

On ordinary days, however, Lum and Red Onions work alone. In his panel truck (used like a Black Maria to bring the wetbacks to the inspection station) there is a radio, which Lum is supposed to use to call for help when he spots his quarry. Usually, though, he doesn't bother, because he and his horse can handle the situation alone.

When he rounds up an alien, he marches him in front of Red Onions back to the truck. He can handle six or eight of them at once this way, keeping them in single file ahead of the horse.

"Sometimes," he says, "they'll be smart enough to try to scatter suddenly, all at once. But Red Onions must have some cowpony in his blood. He rounds them up in no time."

Lum believes there's a special psychological advantage to using horses in dealing with the Mexicans. "They have much more respect for a horse than for any kind of a car—from a jeep to a ten-ton truck."

Mexican children grow up worshiping vaqueros, the way American kids worship cowboys, and any man on a horse is likely to be endowed with all the courage and daring of a vaquero. Also the *rurales*, the rural police, are mounted, and they are known all over Mexico and the world as real tough cops.

Lum isn't sure just what the reason is, but he knows "the wetbacks have a real awe of horses—especially big ones."

It seems to us that just about anyone would be in awe of a horse like Red Onions, who seems to combine the best characteristics of a hound dog and a mountain goat in tracking down fugitives.

There's no question that he enjoys his work—as anybody does who's good at his job. "When he walks out of his trailer of a morning," says Lum, "he paws the ground and chomps at the bit till we get going."

Actually, on the job or off it, Red Onions has a life that any horse might envy. He's gentle enough to be a real family pet, and is often ridden just for fun by Gilman's family. It's not remarkable that Mrs. Gilman can take him for long jaunts through the countryside, because she's a real cowgirl (and a beauty besides, once Queen of the Pendleton Round-Up). But Gilman's son, now 11, has been riding Red Onions since he was 8.

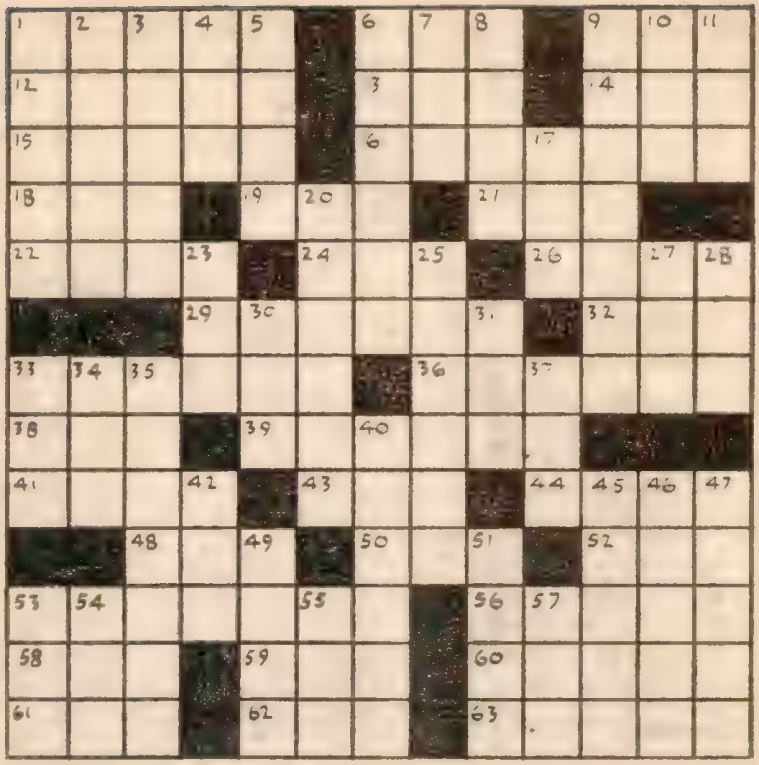
And just to make his life complete, Red Onions also takes in a few of the local rodeos.

"He loves the excitement and the applause," says Gilman. "I use him for roping, but he also can fill in as a pick-up horse. And when he's in the grand entry, he prances along like a high-stepping circus horse."

We think maybe Red Onions figures that the cheers and applause are simply his due for all the work he puts in guarding the U.S. Border.

Adios,
THE EDITOR.

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



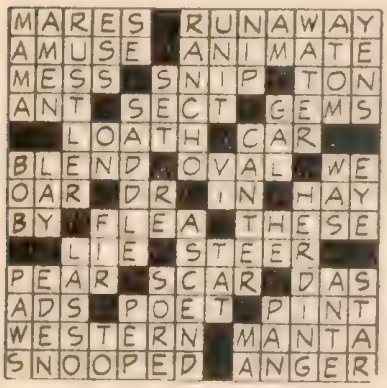
The solution to this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1. Calico horse
6. Metal container
9. Which person
12. Mistake
13. Fruit drink
14. Stop-light color
15. Lariat
16. Cowboy
18. One who does: suffix
19. Lump of butter
21. Male child
22. Sinister look
24. Chestnut covering
26. Hen products
29. Entertains
32. Robert E. ——
33. Horse blankets
36. Saddlebag
38. To be in debt
39. To recommence
41. Nuisance
43. Papa
44. Competent
48. Faucet
50. River barrier
52. Raced
53. Mottled, as horses
56. Separately
58. Hearing organ
59. Pres. Coolidge's nickname
60. Cattle land
61. Answer (abbr.)
62. Organ of sight
63. Senior

DOWN

1. Danger
2. To get up
3. Angry
4. In no way
5. To snare
6. Western desert plant
7. Fuss
8. Latest information
9. To herd, as cattle
10. Chicken
11. Peculiar
17. Garden tool
20. Mistreated
23. Rodent
25. Group of saddle horses
27. To obtain
28. Ocean
30. To deface
31. Our Uncle
33. Floor-cleaning implement
34. Solemn fear
35. Western squatters
37. Pasture
40. Cowboy's seat
42. Flap
45. Owner's mark on cattle
46. Big
47. To come in
49. Step
51. Female horse
53. Green vegetable
54. —— Hunter, actor
55. To deposit
57. Chum



Solution to Puzzle in the Preceding Issue

War on the Ramhorn

By

Elsa Barker

"Brian, you shouldn't be here!" she breathed

THE STORY SO FAR: SGT. BRIAN O'TARA, due for army discharge with his brother TIM buys land which RENE BROUSSARD always considered part of his Ramhorn. This angers Broussard and Brian's CAPTAIN AUBREY GRAYSON, who courts LUCITA BROUSSARD. When Tim is killed by a spooked horse both Lucita and Brian suspect Ramhorn's boss, CASEY HANCOCK and Ramhorn rider ACE BULLOCK. In a fight between Ramhorn hands and army friends of Brian's, Ace is knifed to death.

MARK LEDBETTER, with whom Tim came to the West, is accused of Ace's murder and taken by Capt. Grayson and SHERIFF GONZALES to the flimsy jail at Los Vernales. The townsmen, dead set against sodbusters and stirred up by whiskey, threaten a lynching. DORA LEDBETTER, Mark's daughter, seeks Brian's aid, and he rides to the fort, gets some men, and returns to Los Vernales. On the way into town SGT. SAM FOLEY is shot down from ambush. . . .

PART THREE

AS IF THE SHOT that tumbled Sam Foley from the saddle had been a signal agreed upon, men started boiling into the street from the saloon, the plaza and several doorways. In noisy, disorganized order the swiftly formed mob started moving slowly en masse toward the jail. Behind his bar, Bobo Ortega wiped his hands on the grimy apron around his fat middle, hurried into his private office

behind the bar and locked the door.

The vaquero who had shot Sam sped up the rickety stairs in the Hotel Del Valle and banged urgently on the door.

Brian O'Tara and the soldiers had heard the shot too. With no order spoken, almost as one man, they purred their horses at a reckless cavalry run straight down the hill into town.

Beyond the jail at the other end of the street the pitifully few Vernal Creek settlers bunched themselves together in some semblance of order and started grimly walking, carrying an odd assortment of old and long unused guns, to meet whatever had to be met to save Mark Ledbetter. Behind them the women fell in. They were also armed, a few with guns, some with only butcher knives or axes. But there was the same grimly determined look on all faces.

The little squad of cavalrymen hit Los Vernales at a gallop, swerved around a row of hitchracks, and at the plaza suddenly slowed their horses to a brisk, military walk. They cut across the plaza without breaking stride or formation. But for the seriousness of their purpose, it might have been a pretty parade maneuver.

To their right the farmers were moving in, quiet, grim, and determined. To their left the mob advanced with the ominous grumbling sounds typical of a mob with its temper on the boil. There were a few drunken shouts and curses at sight of the soldiers, then sudden quiet.

A dozen steps in front of the jail, Brian spoke a quiet order and with machine-like precision the troopers wheeled into a single line and dismounted, unbooting their carbines in the same smooth movement. The mob had not stopped, but now, in the face of ten raised rifles, the leaders scrambled frantically to get back out of the front row, cursing those who shoved them on. Finally they all stopped. Brian heard a fervent "Thank God!" from somewhere among the farmers, who also stopped and stood waiting.

Then suddenly, stepping briskly, a slim, blue-uniformed figure came marching up the street, followed by Sheriff Gonzales, with his shirt tail hanging out. The mob shifted a little to let them pass. Captain Grayson halted six paces in front of Brian O'Tara. His cold blue eyes eyed the farmers and their helter-skelter assortment of guns for a moment, then riveted angrily on Brian.

"O'Tara, I presume you are responsible for the presence of these misguided farmers. Now get them out of town—and keep them there!"

A murmur of surprise ran through the mob. They moved forward a couple of feet. Brian spoke quietly to the soldiers behind him.

"Hold your aim, boys!" he said.

Nine soldiers looked uneasily at the slim figure of their commanding officer, but did not lower their carbines. Brian turned back to Captain Grayson.

"Captain," he said quietly, trying to sound respectful. "I don't think you understand the situation, sir. These people—" he motioned toward the mob of townspeople with his left hand.

"I understand fully," the captain interrupted him. "This riffraff is attempting to break a lawful prisoner out of jail. It is the duty of the United States Army to uphold law and order here."

"No, sir!" It was a little harder this time for Brian O'Tara to keep his voice calm. "These farmers are here to keep Ledbetter from being lynched. I suggest, sir, that you detail these troops to guard the jail all night."

"You heard my orders, O'Tara!"

"Yes, sir! But you are mistaken if you—"

"You refuse to obey?"

FOR A MOMENT Brian O'Tara hesitated. He had never felt so alone in his life. Where in hell was Sam Foley? He knew the cavalrymen at his back were good men—but they were soldiers, too. They wouldn't dare disobey the direct orders of their captain to follow a fellow soldier.

In the instant he hesitated, the captain, looking past him, spoke again.

"Corporal Linotti!"

"Yes, sir!" Linotti replied quickly. "You will remove O'Tara's arms, and place him under guard immediately! Then you will escort these farmers back to their homes!"

The young corporal had stepped forward. Now he looked unhappily from Brian to the captain.

"You heard my orders?"

The kid swallowed. Before he could answer, Brian O'Tara had made his decision. He handed the corporal his gun, then swung on his heel. His fist struck swiftly, without warning, with enough force to knock a mule over. It caught the captain on the point of his chin. The dapper captain dropped in his tracks, knocked out cold.

It was that easy, Brian thought, after all this waiting—and to hell with the consequences!

For a shocked moment nobody moved. It almost seemed that no one even drew a breath. The sheriff's mouth dropped open and stayed that way, but he made no move.

Now was the moment when the weight of a broom straw could tilt the scales—when one man's life, maybe more, hung in the balance. If the captain got up, the soldiers would have to obey orders, and the mob would have its way. It was a bitter thing to realize that an army officer could let himself become party to such a shameful performance.

But the captain lay still. O'Tara drew a deep breath. He knew very well what he had done and the price he would have to pay. He looked at Corporal Linotti. The shocked look faded from the kid's face. Something like a grin twisted up his lips.

"We couldn't quite hear the captain's orders, Sergeant. What was it he ordered us to do?"

At that instant two galloping horses came dusting around the plaza, a slender girl with black hair, Lucita Broussard, in the lead. She jumped off her horse, skirted the edge of the mob on the run, then as she sized up the situation with one quick glance, slowed to a deliberate, queenly walk. She held her long skirt up out of the dust and came on, walking slowly, her chin high. Even in the growing dusk no man in that mob failed to recognize her.

Her eye fell on the prone figure of Captain Grayson, and Brian O'Tara heard her quickly indrawn breath. She gave him one quick, shocked look, then moved on to stand directly in front of the jail door, where she could face them all.

"Amigos," she said quietly. "There must not be more fighting—more people hurt—tonight!" She said it again in Spanish.

One of the numerous Spanish in-laws of Ace Bullock elbowed his way out of the mob to stand before her.

"*Señorita,*" he said quietly. "We do not want fights. We want only justice. Our cousin has been killed. We ask only that the man who killed him pay the just penalty."

Lucita answered him in Spanish. "We have courts of law to try people and decide whether they are guilty or not."

"He will be tried by a gringo court and a gringo judge," said Pedro Chacón bitterly.

"Shame on you!" the girl said sharply. "A thousand shames on all of you that think such things. We are all Americans together. If you think this so-called gringo judge is bad—why did you vote for him?"

At the sound of her voice a few black-shawled women had begun coming out of the houses. Now they started shoving into the mob, finding their own menfolks, speaking to them in urgent whispers.

"Please—no more fighting! There would be some of you killed. We would all grieve at that."

The black-shawled women had most of their men in tow now, and their low voices were helping her out. The soldiers still stood with their carbines ready.

MAYBE it was partly the persuasion of Lucita Broussard, or maybe the ten grim *soldados* standing with ready guns, that cooled hot blood. Slowly, one by one, the mob began to scatter, until in a few moments the street was practically clear, except for the group of Vernal Creek

farmers. Even the sheriff had disappeared.

Lucita turned to Brian.

"Please ask your soldiers to stay on guard here at the jail until we can be sure everything is quiet; then I think they should escort Mr. Ledbetter to White Rock."

"You heard your orders, boys," said Brian.

They all grinned a little, some of them showing disappointment that it was all over so easily. Not even Corporal Linotti looked much worried about the hell they would all be due to catch later.

Lucita looked down at the captain. "You did this, Brian."

"Yes, ma'am. If I'd known you were coming I might have waited a few minutes and let you see it!"

"It will mean prison for you."

"Not if they don't catch me."

"You mean desertion?"

"That's what they call it."

She drew a deep breath. "I—I guess I can't blame you. But I—if you will come with me, I'll help you get away. We have good horses on the Ramhorn. If you could get to Mexico—"

Brian shrugged, his mind on more immediate problems. Two of the soldiers were hammering on the flimsy door with their rifle butts. The rotten wood splintered out, and the door squeaked open.

On the ground, Captain Grayson stirred. Lucita gave him a quick look, then motioned to Doctor Rankin, just back from wherever he had been.

"Doctor, can you give Captain Grayson something to keep him asleep for a while?"

The doctor nodded. "Fetch me my bag from the buggy, Karl. Have a couple of the soldiers carry him inside, where I can work on him in private. I won't let a man die if I can help it, but if this jasper ain't bad hurt an' you want him slumberin', I reckon I can stretch my hoss-doctor ethics a little and give him a shot."

Corporal Linotti came out of the jail with Mark Ledbetter. The big German had heard the ruckus outside, and then the door had been battered in. Now it showed that he thought his final hour had come.

Mrs. Ledbetter ran a few steps toward him, then slowed to a sedate walk. She wasn't the kind of woman who could throw her arms around her husband in plain sight of all these strangers. She gave his arm a little pat that was half a slap.

"Land sakes, Mark," she scolded. "How you do manage to be a worry to your family!"

The big German's taut face relaxed as he smiled down at her. "I'm sorry, Marda. Maybe some time you teach me to do better, eh?"

"You're the first of my family that's ever been in jail. I don't know how I'll ever hold up my head again. Likely they'll half starve you to death in White Rock. I'll send over some decent food tomorrow—and some clean socks."

"Thank you, Marda."

Brian looked at Corporal Linotti. "You think you can get him to White Rock all right?"

The corporal grinned. "I sure do!"

In spite of himself, Brian got that lump in his throat again. His fist poked the corporal affectionately on the shoulder. "Good-by, Linotti. I won't be riding with you any farther tonight."

From the suddenly sobered faces, he knew they understood what he meant, with all its implications. This would probably be the last time they would ever stand facing each other as friends and equals. The next time they might be looking at him over the sights of a rifle.

"Good luck! I've got to see what happened to Sam Foley!"

Something had happened to Sam. Likely that single shot he had heard had been aimed at the big sergeant as he rode back into town. If Sam was dead, Brian had another score to settle.

THE MOB had scattered, but there were a few men in the streets whose tempers still rankled. They eyed Brian sourly. Some of them muttered oaths as he passed. He paid no attention, although his hand hovered near the army Colt at his hip.

When he had gone a dozen yards he heard running footsteps coming behind

him. Lucita caught up with him and slipped an arm through his.

"Sometimes you act like an awful fool," she scolded. "Someone could put a bullet in your back—and no one would ever know who did it."

"Then you'd better stay away from me. They might get mad at you, too."

"None of my people will hurt me, and you are safe as long as you are with me."

"You've got confidence in yourself."

She looked at him gravely. "You don't understand. They love me because I am Luz Vallejo's daughter."

They had passed the dark plaza now. Ahead of them a riderless horse made rollers in his nose and sidled away. On the ground a man groaned profanely.

"Sam!" O'Tara exclaimed.

A rich, rolling string of good army profanity answered him. Sam Foley raised himself up to a sitting position. Even in the growing dark Brian could see that his left arm hung limp.

"Why the hell can't them sons learn to aim dead center?" Foley complained. I could of had a nice military funeral. Instead it looks like I've got me a ruined flipper and a damn busted head. Hit it on a rock when I dived out of the saddle. I wish to—" He broke off abruptly as he recognized the slim figure of a girl with Brian, then went on quickly. "Excuse me, miss. I didn't realize you was a lady!"

"Don't apologize, Sergeant. I was raised on a ranch."

Foley grunted, coughed, and turned his head to spit out a wad of tobacco. "Nearly drowned in my own juice," he said sourly. "Is church out?"

"Yeah. The boys are just starting for White Rock with Ledbetter now. You hurt bad, Sam?"

"If you mean does it hurt—yes. I don't reckon my arm's shot plumb off though."

"Doc Rankin's here. I'll get him to come look at you and we'll get that bullet hole plugged up."

"Wait!" Lucita caught his arm as he started to stand up. "The sergeant will be all right for a minute, and I'll take care of him for you. Brian, you've got to get on your horse and ride away—right now!"

Sam Foley sighed. He eased himself off his elbow and back down on the ground. "More insubordination?" he demanded. "What have you done now, halfwit?"

"I'll tell you about it later," Lucita told him. "Brian, I want to help you. Will you trust me?"

"Why should I trust you?"

"If this little lady told me the moon was made of chewin' tobacco," said Sam Foley, "I'd believe it!"

Even as busy as he had been in the past several hours, Brian O'Tara had had time to think things over. Some things he had done in the past two months were the things any man of honor had to do, but he had made mistakes too. He regretted the times he had needlessly graveled Captain Grayson, and realized that he had fed the captain's antagonism until the stiff-necked, prideful little officer would inevitably decide to go north if he suggested south. Maybe if he had managed differently, his own course would have been changed, and he wouldn't now be a deserter from the army.

He stood up. "I'm moving now," he said. He put a hand down and touched Lucita's dark hair lightly. "I can't accept your offer. I've got a job to do. But I'd like to tell you this much—I'll hate if if I have to make trouble for you. Good-by, Sam."

For a moment his blue uniform was a tall, moving shadow; then it faded into the darkness.

Lucita drew a long, ragged breath. She put a hand up and rubbed her eyes.

"I—I think I'm going to cry, Sam. Do you mind?"

AT THE OTHER END of the plaza several people had brought out lanterns and hung them from the *viga* ends on the front of the houses. There were still people around the plaza, but they were broken into small groups now, and Lucita could hear some of them laughing, their anger of a few minutes ago apparently gone like a bursted soap bubble.

Wagons creaked as the farmers made ready to go back to their homes for the

night. As Lucita started to go find help for Sam Foley, a tall cowboy on foot came around the plaza, his eyes searching each group of people as he passed. Lucita called him.

"Casey!"

His stride quickened. "I thought you'd given me the slip."

"I've got a hurt soldier here, Casey. Will you help him back to where Dr. Rankin is? He says he'll be able to ride to the fort all right once his arm is taken care of."

"Why, sure, Lucy," Casey said. He sounded pleased that she had asked a small favor of him.

"Then see if Bobo will lend us a wagon and team. I want to take Captain Grayson to the Ramhorn, where Mama and I can look after him for a few days. Have Bobo put some hay and blankets in the wagon bed so it won't be too rough riding."

He hesitated at that, looked for a moment as if he were going to protest, but her smile and the hand on his arm seemed to win the decision. . . .

By the time Sergeant Foley's wound was dressed, the wagon was ready. Lucita called Dr. Rankin aside for a moment as they laid the captain in the wagon bed.

"Could you fix me up something that would make him feel a little sick and dopey after he wakes up? Something that might keep him that way tomorrow, too?"

A hint of a twinkle came into the doctor's dark eyes.

"I don't exactly know what you're up to, miss, but if it's going to help Brian O'Tara in any way, I reckon I can." He opened his black bag, studied the bottles inside, and finally poured some white powder from two of them into a strong envelope and handed it to her.

"I'd say about a half teaspoonful of this in some hot milk or water about every four hours ought to do the trick. Don't overdo it, or you may have a sicker man than you figured on."

"I'll be careful, and thank you, Doctor." She tucked the envelope inside the front of her dress. She went outside and climbed up on the wagon seat beside Casey.

"I'll send somebody over after the saddle horses tomorrow, and ride back with you tonight."

She saw that pleased him, and for a moment she felt a little sorry for him. Then the feeling faded. No one needed to feel sorry for Casey. Casey had plenty of confidence in his own ability to get what he wanted.

The captain was snoring as Casey slapped the reins over the horses' rumps.

"Your pretty captain's stayin' out a long time for just a little punch in the jaw."

Lucita lied cheerfully. "I think he hit his head on the flagstone step as he fell. The doctor thinks he may have a slight brain concussion."

"I wouldn't care if the fine fancy-pants died," Casey said bluntly.

Lucita said nothing.

THEY ROLLED through the Ramhorn front gate about an hour and a half later, and Captain Grayson stirred, groaned and halfway sat up.

Lucita turned, put her hand on his shoulder and pushed him back down. "Lie down, Aubrey! You hurt your head when you fell a while ago. You may have a brain concussion."

"But you, Lucita—where—"

"I'll tell you about it later."

Casey pulled the team to a stop. "I'll get Pablo to help me unload this fancy freight so it won't bite nobody."

Lucita gave the captain's shoulder an admonishing pat. "You stay where you are, Aubrey. The doctor said to give you some hot milk when you came to, and I'll go in now and get a fire started."

When she came back a few minutes later, Captain Grayson was standing up outside the wagon, feeling his head gingerly.

"There's nothing wrong with my head. What I want to know is—"

Casey Hancock and a sleepy-eyed Pablo were coming across the yard. Lucita caught the captain's arm and gave it a shake.

"You're liable to fall and kill yourself! Now you behave, and let Casey and Pablo help you." She turned to the other men.

"The first room to your right at the head of the stairs, Casey. Undress him and put him to bed. By that time I'll have his milk ready."

Casey stared at her and then at the captain, and she saw his big white teeth gleam in a wide grin.

"You heard the lady, Captain. You want to walk or ride?"

Still groggy, the captain didn't raise much fuss about being helped inside. He even docilely drank the cup of milk Lucita brought him a little later. When she went downstairs again, Casey Hancock was waiting for her in the kitchen.

"What goes on, anyhow?"

"What do you mean?"

"I just happened to remember somethin'. I got down there at the ruckus just as they were gettin' ready to pick the captain up an' carry him inside. He wasn't anywhere near that stone step."

Lucita shrugged. "Well, obviously he hit his head on something. As you said yourself—a little punch on the jaw wouldn't knock a man out for several hours."

Casey grinned. "That's right. This captain looked to me like he was ready to get in the saddle an' ride right now. I was just wondering what's the big idea of tryin' to make him think he's a sick man."

Lucita looked at him with narrowed eyes. "I'm just following the doctor's orders," she said sharply. "Naturally I don't want him to try to ride to the fort tonight, if he's really sick."

Casey said, grinning, "I'm on your side sweetie-pie. Any time you want to cross up the captain it's just dandy with me!"

"I don't know what you mean!"

"I reckon you do!"

Lucita's mind was buzzing around as frantically as a fly in a trap. The idea of conniving in any way with Casey Hancock was repugnant, yet if she batted his ears down too hard, he might be tough to handle. Right now she had her hands full trying to figure out how to manage two other men, her father and Aubrey Grayson. If she could just keep the captain here on the Ramhorn for a day or so, until her father returned, she could tell her father the whole story, and maybe he could persuade the captain to be lenient with Brian O'Tara.

Her momentary panic subsided as she realized that while Casey might have suspicions, he couldn't actually know a darned thing about what she had in mind. She put a hand over her mouth, feigning a yawn.

"You're talking riddles, and I'm too sleepy to argue with you. Anyhow, it's a good idea to keep your mouth shut unless you know what you're talking about. Good night, Casey."

Before she turned away she caught a brief glint in his gray-green eyes, and knew she had raised herself another notch in his estimation.

LUCITA went upstairs, and moved quietly down the long hall to her mother's room. Before she reached it, Rosa came out, carrying a lighted candle. The old lady's tiny, withered face was drawn with worry. She caught the girl's arm.

"This time of night! Where have you been?"

"I had to go out, but I haven't been out having a good time. How is Mama?"

"So seeck. She won't take medicine because she afraid it put her to sleep so she don't see you when you come back. You are very bad tonight."

"I'll see her now. Fix her something to help her sleep, Rosa, and I'll see that she takes it."

Old Rosa waddled off down the hall, muttering and shaking her head. Lucita opened the door.

Her mother's face was white and drawn with pain. She lay with her eyes shut, the faint light of candles giving it a waxy, deathlike pallor, so that for a moment fear clutched at the girl's heart.

The big dark eyes opened. "Lucy! I've been so worried about you. Rosa said Casey had gone with you, and you stayed so long. He is a good cowboy but a bad man, *querida*. I don't like you to ride with him alone at night."

"I know, Mama." The girl gently brushed the heavy black hair away from

the pale forehead. "But tonight I had to go." Quickly she told her mother of Mark Ledbetter's arrest for murder—how Dora had come to her for help because she feared they meant to lynch him. "Casey followed us to Los Vernales. I wasn't alone with him. Captain Grayson was hurt and Casey helped me bring him here to the Ramhorn in a wagon."

Her mother's eyes had never left her face while she talked. "I should have known not to worry about you!" Her fingers tightened around the girl's hand. "Now—I want you to send somebody for the little Doctor Rankin to come at once."

The girl gasped. Her mother smiled.

"I'm not so very sick, Lucita. It's just the old stomach ache—like I have when I worry or feel sad. But this funny little doctor is one of those farmers that your papa is so bitter against, is he not? If he could give me something to make me feel better, I would tell a big story to René when he comes back. I would make him think this doctor really saved my life." She smiled softly. "You know how Papa is—soft inside the heart where you and I are concerned, Lucita. Maybe it would soften his heart toward those poor settlers, too!"

Impulsively Lucita bent over and kissed her.

"That's wonderful. And I believe Dr. Rankin might really know how to give you relief. But I must not send any of the vaqueros. I will go myself."

For a moment her mother's clinging fingers clutched tighter on her hand, then reluctantly let her go.

"In the morning. In the daylight."

"Now," said Lucita. "We must be sure this matter is all done before Papa comes home."

"Yes, but—"

"I'll be careful."

In the hall she met Rosa coming up with a cup of steaming *alta misa*. The old woman frowned at her, getting ready to scold again. Lucita pinched her cheek.

"I'm going out again, Rosa. *Mamacita* knows, but you must not tell anyone else that I have gone."

The old woman let out a stream of petulant Spanish scolding. Lucita laughed and hurried down the hall. In spite of her fussing, Rosa could be trusted.

Lucita's heart was less troubled as she ran down the stairs. With her mother solidly on her side, the battle for the homeseekers seemed practically won. It wasn't often that Luz Broussard went against her husband's wishes, but when she did, she usually found adequate, if devious means to have her way.

René Broussard wasn't going to like this. He would be cross and angry, but he was a man who paid his debts, moral as well as financial. It would be hard for him to press his war against the farmers, if he believed Dr. Rankin had saved his wife's life.

It was now only midnight. That left plenty of time for the doctor to come and be away before daylight.

A TALL BAY she sometimes rode was in the corral, and she saddled him quickly, throwing an anxious look toward the bunkhouse now and then. When she was finally out of the Ramhorn yard, she breathed a sigh of relief, and lifted her horse to a lope.

Late as it was, there was still a light in the Ledbetter house when she got there. The doctor's big stud, tied to a tree near the house, whinnied a shrill greeting as she rode close. He had a saddle on, and she could smell sweat from his heavy sides.

Dora opened the door. "Who is it?" she called sharply.

Lucita stepped out of the saddle. "Lucita Broussard. I wanted to see Dr. Rankin."

Dora's anxious look faded. She held the door open.

"Come in. Uncle Polk is just back from Los Vernales. He'd barely got home when a man came for him to doctor a woman named Mrs. Apodaca. We were afraid it was some kind of a trick, but he went anyway, and all the woman had was a bad stomach ache, so he gave her something that made her feel better. To us it's the best thing that's happened since we came."

Polk Rankin got up from his chair.

"You said you wanted to see me?"

"Yes, my mother's sick, too, Dr. Rankin. Not bad. She has these spells with her stomach, every so often, especially when she's worried and upset."

"Will your father let her—"

"Papa isn't home. Mama sent me to you. She thought if you could give her something that would relieve her, she could tell Papa how wonderful it was that you helped her."

"I'd better go back with you. My Elixir of Life is good for most human ailments. But in case of bad stomach ache I don't like to prescribe at long distance."

"I hoped you would." Lucita smiled at the two women. "I wish I could promise you that Papa won't make any trouble for you from now on. At least there's a chance. Mama can usually think of some way to bring him around once she makes up her mind."

The doctor opened his little black bag, held a couple of nearly empty bottles up to the light, then went to the cupboard in the corner and refilled them from larger bottles there. He snapped the bag shut, clapped his old hat on his head, and swallowed a last gulp of coffee.

Polk Rankin's legs were short and his stud was tall. Holding the black bag, he hauled himself laboriously into the saddle. He caught the dubious glance Lucita gave the clumsy-looking animal, and chuckled as he leaned forward to pat the horse's thick neck.

"You set your own pace, little lady," he said cheerfully. "Big Prince and me will keep up or bust."

Surprisingly they did. The clump of the horse's big feet seemed to make the earth tremble when they galloped, but his heart was as big as his body, and there was strength in his powerful legs.

Lucita circled a little coming into the Ramhorn, so that they pulled up in the shadows of two big old cottonwoods outside the front patio wall.

"We'll tie our horses here," she said. "I think it's better if none of the cowboys see you until Mama has had a chance to talk to Papa."

The doctor nodded understandingly.

Rosa met them at the door, a lamp in her hand. She eyed the doctor resentfully.

"Your mama need no doctor. She drink some of Rosa's tea—then she sleep like the baby. You go home, gringo!"

"Hush, Rosa! Mama told me to bring the doctor." Lucita took the lamp from the scowling old woman. "This way, Dr. Rankin."

"Thees doctor will do her bad! Tomorrow I tell your Papa, Lucita!"

"Hush!" said the girl again, this time so sharply that the old woman closed her mouth. She followed Lucita and the doctor upstairs, still muttering angrily.

Luz Broussard wasn't asleep. Her big eyes were open, shadows of pain in them again.

"You must have hurried, *niña*. It seems just five minutes ago you left."

"Miss Lucita tells me you need some of Rankin's Elixir of Life." Polk Rankin's voice was breezy, but his eyes were sharp on the sick woman's white face.

"I have just remembered another patient down the hall," Lucita said. "While you talk to Mama, I'll go look in on him to see that Rosa didn't poison him while I was gone."

THE CAPTAIN was asleep, snoring noisily. His jaw was swollen, his mouth open. He didn't need any attention, so Lucita went back to her mother's room. The doctor picked up his bag and motioned her to follow him out into the hall. He closed the door, and ran distressed fingers through his wiry hair.

"I gave her a dose of Elixir to make her feel better, an' a pill to make her sleep."

"Fine. That's what we wanted."

He ran his fingers through his hair again. "The truth is, Miss Lucita, I'm just a sort of an old horse doctor. But I do know when I'm out of my depth. Your mother's trouble ain't just ordinary stomach ache. If I was you folks I'd get her somewhere where there's better doctors—quick!"

Sudden fear clutched the girl. "What's the matter with her?"

"I don't know for sure. But like I say,

I'd get her to some good doctors. I left her a fresh bottle of Elixir. It'll make her feel better, an' it won't hurt her. I'm dead sure of that. But it ain't no cure."

"I see," said the girl slowly.

He picked up his bag. "Good night, Miss Lucita. You don't need to come down with me. I can find my way."

She opened the door. Rosa was sitting by the bed, her thin shoulders showing no sign of fatigue. She shook her head at the girl, motioning her back. Her mother's eyes were closed and she seemed to be asleep.

Lucita went down the hall to her own room, and threw herself on the bed without undressing, a terrible fear and uncertainty clutching at her heart. The doctor's grave face had indicated plainly that he thought her mother might die, and the girl's frightened mind rebelled at accepting it. Never had the Ramhorn or the people of these high foothill valleys needed Doña Luz more than they did now. Reñe Broussard had managed the Ramhorn well, but it had been his wife's gentle wisdom and kind ways with the native people that had made the way easy for him.

Lying on her bed, staring wide-eyed into the dark, Lucita saw these things clearly for the first time. She had always loved her father, admired his skill with horse and gun, been proud that he had been one of Kit Carson's mountain men. She had loved her mother, too, but never quite so much as now, when she faced the hard fact that she might soon lose her.

It seemed that she could not possibly sleep this night, but she was young and she was tired. Presently her eyes closed.

SHE HAD SLEPT only for a short time, it seemed, when Rosa was shaking her. "Lucita! Lucita! Wake up!" At first it seemed that the frantic old voice was only a part of a bad dream. Then her eyes opened.

Rosa's black eyes were wide with terror. "Señorita! Your Mama! She ees dyeeng! That doctor poisoned her—just like I tell you!"

Lucita swung off the bed. Terror struck at her own heart. Rosa had taken care of a lot of sick people in her day—she knew death when she saw it.

Lucita ran down the hall, Rosa shuffling awkwardly after her in a pair of flapping old moccasins. The candle she carried flickered and went out, so that there was only a faint ghostly starlight shining through the high window.

The door of the bedroom was open, and Luz Broussard lay quietly, her head thrown back, her body twisted. Rosa took one look at her, then gave a wild shriek, and dropped to her knees beside the bed.

Frantically, knowing that it was useless, Lucita took her mother's hand, feeling for the pulse that wasn't there. She laid her hand over her breast, and knew that the gentle heart was still forever. A sob tore at her throat, and an aching sense of desolation waved over her. She reached down and caught Rosa's hand and held it, finding and giving comfort in a shared loss. Finally she was aware what the old woman was saying:

"He killed her. My poor *señora!* That bad man—he murder her!"

Lucita gave her shoulder a gentle shake. "Tell me what happened, Rosa?"

The old woman raised her head, sucking in a sobbing breath. "She wake up a little while ago, hurting again. She ask me for some medicine the doctor left—in the brown bottle. I geeve her big swallow. She lay quiet maybe five minutes, maybe ten, then her face twist all up again. 'Go get Lucita!' she say. 'Quick. That medicine—something wrong!' Then she twist all up again—her face turn purple. That's all, *señorita!*" She buried her face in her hands again, swaying back and forth in wild abandonment to grief.

A horrible sense of guilt mingled with Lucita's heartbreak. She picked up the brown bottle of medicine, opened it, and sniffed it. There was a pungent odor to it that seemed faintly familiar. Suppose it really had killed her mother? Was Dr. Rankin just an old horse doctor as he had said, or had he done this deliberately? The thought was ugly, but it wouldn't go away.

It was possible that the Ledbetters and Dr. Rankin should hate the Broussards—

maybe even enough for murder. Possible—but not logical. They must surely have seen how everyone loved Luz Broussard. They must surely realize that when word of how she had died was told, the whole Ramhorn country would rise up against them, and they would all be lucky to escape with their lives. A chill of pure terror struck her when she thought of her father—what he would think and what he would do.

She picked up the bottle and tucked it inside her dress. She shook Rosa's shoulder. "Rosa—I have to do something! Something I know my mother would want me to do!"

"*Sí señorita!* You will keel that man. I will help you!"

"No! Listen! I want you to stay here in this room with my mother while I'm gone. Lock the door after me. Don't let anyone else in—or tell anyone my mother is dead—until I get back! You understand?"

"But—"

"Rosa, what I'm going to do is right! I will send Casey to White Rock after my father and Dr. Welsey—but I won't even tell him she is dead till he gets here! You will do what I say?"

Rosa nodded reluctantly.

LUCITA roused Casey Hancock at the bunkhouse and told him what she wanted. He didn't stop to ask questions. He just ran a big hand briefly over her dark hair.

"Why sure," he said. "I'll go get Rainy an' the doc—and' I'll get 'em back here pronto. Don't you worry." He noticed then that she was still wearing the same dress she had had on earlier in the evening, and that her face was white and drawn. "You've been up all night, kid. You should have called me sooner."

She shook her head and turned away to keep him from seeing that a sympathetic word or a pat on the head was enough to bring tears to her eyes. She waited at the kitchen door until he rode out of the yard, then she started wearily for the cor-

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rals again herself. Halfway there a new, uneasy fear caught at her mind and turned her back.

She had given Captain Grayson a big dose of some white powder Doctor Rankin had fixed for her earlier, to keep him feeling sick—and the doctor had as much reason to hate the captain as to hate the Broussards.

She hurried back up the stairs. The door of the captain's bedroom was partly open, and the room was quiet. The captain was no longer snoring. The fear tightened around her heart and became a dread certainty in her mind. She stepped inside, holding a candle high in her left hand. She gave a sharp little gasp.

The bed was empty, and the captain's clothes were gone!

The girl moved slowly out into the hall and down the stairs, this last blow leaving her strangely numb. A few hours ago she had been riding high—feeling a little as if she were playing God. She had felt capable of managing everybody and everything and making it all come out right.

But now she had no doubt that Aubrey Grayson was on his way back to the fort as fast as a horse would carry him. By morning he would have the whole garrison out looking for Brian O'Tara. Lucita said a word that her father and the vaqueros would have been surprised at her knowing.

She went out through the front door. There was a chance that the captain had just felt in need of fresh air, and had come down here to wait the few short hours until daylight.

In the dim moonlight the old lilac and wild spirea bushes were shadowy, ominous blobs of blackness. Lucita, who had seldom in her life known physical fear, suddenly shivered. She turned and hurried toward the gate. But to her left she distinctly heard a rustling sound behind one of the lilacs.

FOR BRIAN O'TARA the night had been as busy as it had been for Lucita Broussard. When he had left Los Vernales, riding a flea-bitten gray cavalry horse that would serve to qualify him as a horsethief as well as a deserter, it had been with a settled determination to get started right now on the chore he had set for himself weeks ago, but which so far he had little chance to work at: the dual task of first making himself dead sure who had murdered Tim O'Hara, and then killing him—or them.

Without mentioning the broken-looped quirt he had found on the day of Tim's death, Brian had made some quiet inquiries among his comrades at the fort, and as usual, it was Sergeant Foley who had furnished him the information he wanted. Now, following the rather indefinite directions Sam Foley had given him, he set out to find the house of one Celso Otero, said to be a half crazy old Mexican, who lived alone up Las Lajas Creek—and braided quirts.

In the darkness it took him a couple of hours and several lost trails to find the place. Dim candlelight still showed through the adobe hut's one window, but apparently the old man had already gone to bed, for it took considerable banging on the low door to rouse him.

Finally a croaking voice from inside called: *"Quién es?"*

Brian didn't know much Spanish, but he did know enough to answer: *"Un amigo, hombre!"*

He got no answer to that. He rattled the door again.

"I want to talk to you. I want to buy a quirt."

A moment later he heard the soft shuffling of feet on the pine floor, the heavy thud of an iron bolt on the door being thrown back. When the door opened, Celso Otero had a small-sized cannon in his hand. The gun lowered a little when he saw it was a soldier in uniform.

"This is no time to come to poor man's house, amigo," he said chidingly. "What you want?"

"I'd like to buy a quirt," Brian said. "Señor Broussard showed me his—an' said you made it."

The gun lowered another inch. The old man's eyes were still suspicious. "I got no quirt to sell. You go away!"

WAR ON THE RAMHORN

A sudden inspiration struck Brian. "O'Tara!" he said, pointing to himself. "My name—O'Tara!"

"Otero?" The old man looked interested.

"Sí sí! O'Tara! Same as yours! Maybe we're cousins—*primos!*"

Still seeing doubt in the viejo's bleary eyes, Brian pulled a small bottle of wine from under his arm. "A drink, *primo?*"

"*Primo! Primo!*" A wide grin showed toothless through Celso Otero's sparse gray whiskers. He set down the gun, reached for the bottle with one hand and slapped Brian on the shoulder with the other. "*Primo! Pase!* Come een! Come een!"

Half an hour, a good many *primos* and several drinks later, Celso Otero had promised to braid for his "cousin," for ten dollars, the finest quirt ever made of leather—and Brian had the information he wanted. Two weeks, it would take to braid the quirt, but it would be a good one—even better than the two he had recently finished braiding for Señor Casey Hancock of the Rancho Ramhorn! The braided quirts of Don Celso Otero, understand, were the best in the country! Maybe Señor Hancock had had the bad luck to lose his old one. The second quirt? Maybe he had wanted that one for a gift for the señorita, Lucita. Celso Otero asked if Brian knew the señorita.

"I've seen her a time or two," said Brian dryly. "Look!" He pulled the quirt he had found from under his coat. "I want mine made just like this. I found this one. You got any idea who it belongs to?"

The old man shook his head, his eyes suddenly wary. "No, señor," he said with a shrug. "I make many quirts like this. How could I remember?"

Nor did the rest of the wine and the ten dollars Brian paid him in advance for a quirt he never intended to get serve to make him remember.

But Brian didn't particularly care, for he had learned enough to verify the certainty that had been in his mind all the time. It wasn't the kind of evidence that would stand up against the wealth and in-

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fluence of the Ramhorn in a court of law, but since tonight's happenings he was no longer concerned about that.

TROUBLE had ridden him mercilessly for two months, grinding the happy-go-lucky Irish steel in him down to a dangerous cutting edge. His time was short. It was a question of getting the job done fast. In a matter of a few days, perhaps hours, Captain Grayson and the soldiers from the fort would be bound to catch up with him. Before that time he had to kill two men. Casey Hancock first, because he was the man who had actually killed Tim, probably with Ace Bullock's help. The other was René Broussard. Broussard had kept himself in the background, but he was the man who gave the orders.

With Broussard out of the way, trouble would ease up for the farmers. It was that easy.

He thought of Captain Grayson and had a purely personal desire to add him to the list, but he knew that was no good. The captain was a muleheaded, fortune-hunting lick-spittle, but he had actually been in no way responsible for Tim's murder, and there was no time now for a grudge fight. . . .

Leaving Celso Otero's, heading in what he thought was the general direction of the settlement on Vernal Creek, Brian tried to figure out how he could do what had to be done. There was to be no long range dry-gulching with a rifle shot. He wanted both men to know they were going to die—and why.

He stopped for a few minutes at the Ledbetters, where the women put him up a package of food and anxiously urged him to hurry and quit the country. Dora came outside with him and stood near when he stepped into the saddle.

"Brian, you'll let us know where you are?"

Considering what he had in mind, that was hard to answer. "I'll try to."

She held on to his right stirrup. The faint glow of lamplight shining on her face showed a saddened droop to her lips, anxiety in her eyes. He half turned his horse, and her hand fell away.

"Brian—"

"Yes?"

She sighed. "Nothing. Goodbye."

"Good-by, Dora."

She turned back to the house. Looking at the discouraged droop to her shoulders, for a moment he was tempted to take her in his arms and kiss her good-by. After it was all over, it might make it easier for her to believe he had loved her, too. But while he was still thinking about it, she stepped inside, and closed the door.

He turned his horse, leading him at a lope toward the Ramhorn, and Dora Ledbetter was quickly out of his mind. He had never been at the ranch headquarters, but he knew the general direction, and once he got on the trail, his horse kept to it.

His stop had been short, and the army gray, though not too sure-footed, had made good time. It was still not late when he finally pulled up on a pine-covered hill and looked down across the wide green valley at the huge bulk of the Ramhorn buildings and trees.

He staked his horse on a knoll where there was some grass, and settled down to wait. He ate a sandwich that Mrs. Ledbetter had fixed for him, and even risked a cigarette. There were still a few lights in the big house, but none in any of the other buildings. He made a sort of half-sitting, half-reclining bed out of a tree trunk, his saddle, coat and saddle blanket.

He dozed for a time and was awakened by the sound of a horse passing on the trail a hundred yards to his right. For a moment he held his breath for fear his horse would nicker and betray his presence, but the rider passed on, and the hills were quiet again except for a couple of coyotes howling an intermittent challenge to the ranch dogs.

Twice more during the night he was awakened from a half sleep by the sound of riders hurrying by on the trail, and each time his curiosity mounted as he saw that lights still swayed on in the big house. Never more than two or three, and those sometimes flickered from window to window.

Finally he went and got his own horse, led him into a ravine where the pines and scrub oak would hide him from both house and trail, tied him short so that he would not get in any trouble, and started toward the house on foot.

WHEN HE WAS nearly there another rider came hurriedly out of the yard. Brian barely had time to duck behind the wide trunk of a cottonwood. The rider turned to the right, instead of going up over the Los Vernales trail as the others had done, and by the time Brian realized that the tall figure on the

horse was probably Casey Hancock, he was beyond stopping, and going fast. Brian's horse was a quarter of a mile away and not saddled.

He straightened up from his crouched position and moved on toward the house again. Somewhere behind the house a dog barked inquiringly a couple of times, but quieted without coming to investigate.

He circled the wide patio wall cautiously, groping for a gate, and finally he found it. There seemed to be only two lights in the house now. The one shining from an upstairs room had been there ever since he came in sight of the house. The other was moving about from room to room, upstairs and downstairs. He eased open the wooden gate, and moved on through, closing it behind him.

The light was coming back down now, and through the wide window off the front portal he could see Lucita carrying a candle. She blew it out and came onto the porch, then through the patio.

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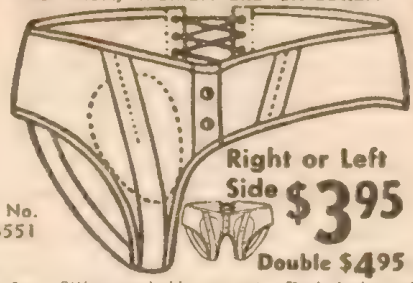

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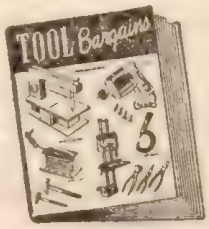

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Brian had ducked behind the shadow of a lilac bush, and as he moved his hand scraped against a cane cactus near the wall. Involuntarily he jerked away from it.

Lucita stopped abruptly, looking toward him. He heard her indrawn breath.

"Aubrey!' she said sharply. "Why are you hiding like a thief?"

Brian stepped out from behind the lilac. She gasped, and took a quick step toward him. She breathed, "Brian!" Then a note of fear came into her voice. "You shouldn't be here! But if you came for a horse, I'll get you a good one. And I'll fix you some food!"

As if impelled by some will other than his own, Brian took a step toward her. "I didn't come for a horse, or for food."

She didn't seem to hear that. She came to meet him. "I—I was never so glad to see anyone in my life!" The last words finished with a sob. Brian put an arm around her, the desolation and heartbreak in her voice cutting through him like a knife. "What's the trouble, Lucita?"

One cheek found his shoulder, and suddenly she was crying, a wild breakdown of sobs shaking her slim body. Brian's other arm went around her to hold her close. The storm of tears was over as quickly as a summer thunderstorm. She snuffled a couple of times, blew her nose, then looked up at him.

"There hasn't been anyone I could talk to. Anyone I could trust. Now—"

Brian dropped his arms. "You can't trust me," he said, remembering his resolve to kill her father.

"But I can! You see—"

"I see that we're in enemy camps. I'm on Mark Ledbetter's and Timmy O'Tara's side. You're on René Broussard's, and Casey Hancock's side—and all hell lies between!"

It took a second for that to soak in. Then her shoulders seemed to shiver and shrink as if he had dealt her a deadly blow. But only for an instant. Her head jerked up with a prideful gesture like her father's.

"Yes—I do see! I am a fool! What are you doing here in the middle of the night?"

"You know why. Is your father here?"

"No—nor Casey either."

"Then I'll go and come back later."

As he turned toward the gate, he heard her draw in a sharp breath.

"I'll still offer you a horse and food. Not because I want to be friends, but because I want you out of the country. I don't want your blood on either my father's or Aubrey Grayson's hands!"

Brian had turned to look at her. "No thanks," he said dryly.

He went out the gate and across the yard, walking straight and unhurried. Behind him, he heard her cross the yard, running toward the corrals, but he didn't turn. Five minutes later she passed him in the trail, riding her horse up the slope at a swift lope. She didn't stop, and he only moved to one side to let her pass.

That moment when she had come to him and he had held her in his arms had shaken him badly. Putting her from him, thrusting aside her offer of help, and repaying her trust with harsh words, had been the hardest thing he had ever had to do. Lucita was obviously in some deep trouble, and while he couldn't offer her his help, he meant to follow her now, and be ready to give her a hand if she needed it.

THE LIGHT of a silver of moon drifting intermittently out from under a thin skim of floating clouds would not have been enough to follow her by, she was so far ahead. But it was a part of horse nature to follow the fresh trail of another horse. Brian gave the gray his head. Occasionally he could hear hoof sounds in the distance, but if she was aware of being followed, she gave no sign of stopping to investigate. Obviously wherever she was going, she was trying to get there quickly.

A few miles from the Ramhorn her course left the old trail and cut across an open meadow in the direction of the farmer settlement. Brian swore softly in puzzlement. Could it mean some new trouble for the farmers? Had something happened to keep Mark Ledbetter from getting safely to the White Rock jail?

He urged his own horse to a faster gait. Even when he felt sure he was close to be

heard by her, the girl still showed no sign that she knew she was being followed. As she cut off the hill toward the Ledbetter house he wasn't far behind her.

While he tied his horse she walked up on the porch and rapped sharply. It was some minutes before the little doctor opened the door, holding a lamp.

Brian stepped up on the porch beside the girl. She threw him a quick, scornful glance, but didn't speak. Dr. Rankin blinked at her in surprise.

"Why, my dear child! What—"

"I want you to come with me again, Dr. Rankin! Now!" Lucita's voice was tight, high-strung, nothing like the quiet, self-assured way she usually spoke.

The doctor rubbed his tousled head, frowning.

"There's nothing more I can do for your mother. Whenever she's in pain just give her some more of that Elixir I left with her."

Even by yellow lamplight Brian could see high color burning in the girl's cheeks.

Suddenly she drew a small gun from the pocket of her skirt. She drew it with the same deft, quick motion a man would, and the small hand that held it was steady, the thumb that flicked back the hammer knew what it was doing.

Dr. Rankin blinked in amazement. "Miss Broussard—"

"You're coming with me!" Her voice was almost hysterical, but there was deadly determination in it. "Believe me—I'm not fooling! I'd hate to shoot—but I will if I have to!"

"Just what would shooting me accomplish?" the doctor asked mildly.

"If I shoot you," said Lucita flatly, "the whole Ramhorn country will rise up to back me and my father—to drive all the farmers out—if they don't lynch them! If you come with me perhaps you will have a chance to prove that sodbusters can be good neighbors. Make up your mind, pronto!"

(To be concluded in the next issue.)

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MAN OF LEO

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The Leo man likes to come between adversity and his loved ones. He tries to stand as a shield against the harshest assaults of life. This trait frequently makes him appear too domineering for those whom he would shelter. Though convinced that his actions are for the good of others, he must always keep in mind the bitter fact that experience is the best teacher.

No matter how much responsibility the man of Leo is tempted to shoulder, he must always bear in mind that they are best helped who help themselves.

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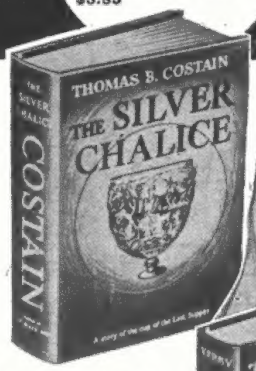

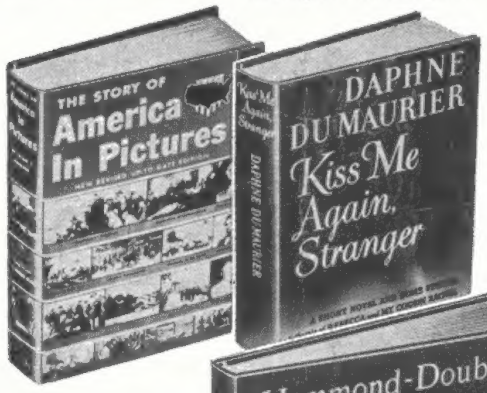

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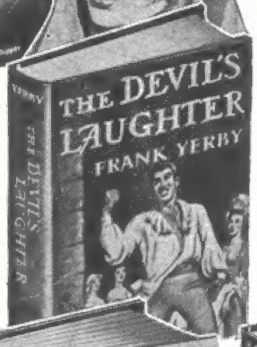

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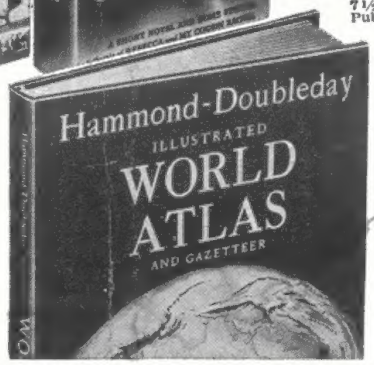

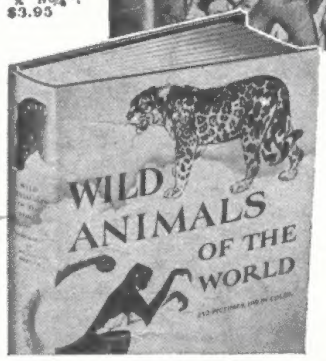

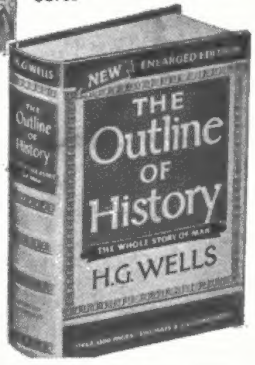

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